

HOPE FOR A NEW MIDRASH:
CREATING INTERPRETIVE STORIES ON NEW TESTAMENT
SCRIPTURES

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Doctor Of Ministry

by
Amanda Joann Burr

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This professional project, completed by

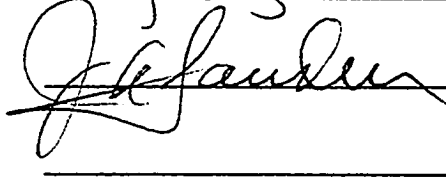
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ABSTRACT

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The Christian community of faith is two thousand years removed from the stories contained in New Testament Scripture. The events, attitudes, persons and scriptural milieu are foreign and unfamiliar to today's North American reader of the Bible. Updated colloquial language versions of the Bible make the scriptures easier to read, but do not provide a hermeneutic that contemporizes the stories and clarifies the theological intention of the scripture.

Chapter 1 of this project deals with Midrash as an ancient hermeneutical form which grew out of the common experience of the faith community. These ancient midrashim have authority as sacred writings.

Chapter 2 discusses the evolution of family folklore and its relationship to a similar evolution of the folklore of the faith community. Modern "Aggadah" midrash which takes the form of interpretive story is, today, being written on the Hebrew Scriptures by Jewish laywomen and scholars in order to recover the stories of

women or rescue those maligned during centuries of narrow male interpretation.

When written on New Testament Scripture modern midrash promises to renew the fading memory of the Christian community of faith. The New Testament as canon is a closed document, yet humanity's experience of God does not end because the holy scriptures end. Modern midrash written on the New Testament Scriptures can create vivid new images to enliven the faith experience of a broad cross section of humanity. Using the term midrash invites us to give them authority as sacred writings.

Chapter 3 outlines step by step how modern midrash is written by visualizing the characters that live in scripture like actors on a stage. Utilizing this method the writer of midrash produces, directs, and designs a moving piece of drama which evolves through a process of reading, questioning, imagining and writing.

Chapters 4-8 offer nine sample midrashim for the student of modern midrash. An introduction telling how the method was used precedes each midrash. Included are midrashim on Crucifixion, Resurrection, call and conversion narratives as well as two troublesome parables: the parable of the tenants in the vineyard and the parable of the dishonest steward.

For Mum and Dad...two Massachusetts Yankees of the first order who believed in me and advised me through various stages of my life practically and with a sense of humor:

In grade school: "Don't compare yourself to other people or your brother and sister either."

In Junior High: "To thine own self be true."

In Nursing School: "Keep On Pluggin' away at it."

Out Of School: "Remember the best friends you have in this world are your bras and your bank account."

In The Peace Corps: "In this life you will meet a lot of people who will tell you when, where, how and with whom to live and to those people you say: "You are absolutely right and I am going to give it a lot of thought." Then you file it away in the circular file.

In Life: You can count the number of real good friends you will have in this life on one hand. A true friend is the person who will bail you out of jail at three o'clock in the morning.

No one is going to pay your way. You must learn to take care of yourself.

Best Love,

Manda

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	vi
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Chapter

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Why Use The Term Midrash?.....	13
3. A Method For Writing Midrash.....	27
Step I: Choosing the Pericope.....	28
Step II: Expanding or Setting the limits of Your Pericope.....	29
Step III: What is it In the Pericope that Captures Your Creative Imagination?.....	32
Step IV: Exegesis and Discovering the Biblical Theological Intention Of Your Pericope.....	35
Step V: Who is my audience and What is the Occasion?.....	37
Step VI: Producing Your Midrash or Setting the Stage.....	39
Step VII: Write the Manuscript and Try it Out.....	44
4. Crucifixion Midrash.....	46
Scriptures.....	51
"The Reader".....	54
5. Resurrection Midrash.....	62

The Scriptural Narratives.....	66
"I Have Seen The Lord, Christ Is Risen".....	68
More Midrash On The Resurrection Narratives.....	75
Scripture.....	78
"In Praise Of Doubting, "I'm From Missouri, Thomas".....	79
Still More Midrash On Resurrection Narratives.....	89
Scripture.....	92
"Emmaus".....	93
6. Midrash On Call And Conversion Narratives....	107
Scripture.....	111
"Starchasers".....	112
Midrash On The Call Of Disciples.....	121
Scripture.....	123
"Leon, Herbie And George".....	124
Midrash On Conversion.....	132
Scripture.....	135
"Threshold Woman".....	136
7. Midrash On Parable.....	142
Scripture.....	145
"The Vineyard".....	146
Introduction To "Stewart The Unwise".....	164
Scripture.....	167

"Stewart The Unwise".....	168
8. Summary And Conclusions.....	178
Bibliography.....	183

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

At the outset, the intention of this project is to help deal with the problem of Biblical Illiteracy in today's churches. The use of the three point sermon has failed in many respects to keep the memory of the Christian community alive. Our collective memory of the customs, and persons, symbols and rituals and events born two thousand years ago has faded over time and geographical distance. Because we cannot remember the significance of scriptural details the theological significance of a passage of scripture often remains hidden from us. This project proposes to teach preachers, teachers and seminarians a method of creating a new body of interpretive stories which can renew the biblical and theological memory of a Bible-hungry Christian Community.

The importance of the problem is reflected in this simplest of statements made to me in the context of a Bible study I was conducting for church members: "We have been going to church for forty years and we still don't understand the Bible." I realized then, even as a

brand new minister, that many who were devoted to the church were going through the motions of worship, but received only scraps of theological food to chew on.

We are a nation of people whose national history is relatively short and when we hear a passage of scripture read, even with inflection, our memories have difficulty conjuring up clear pictures of the event. Even when we succeed at creating some kind of picture in our minds' eye, it is foreign and unfamiliar to us. Consequently the event or character is difficult to identify with our lives. We do not ride camels, or use talents for money and we do not hate the Samaritans. We do have a more recent memory that can produce pictures of pilgrims, and witches, patriots and torreys, cowboys and Indians, bootleggers and suffragettes, because they have been part of our societal and cultural evolution as a nation.

In order for the church to touch a wider segment of its own population and the one that awaits outside the sanctuary doors, the significance of the scriptures for our lives must no longer be clouded by the use of theological jargon in sermon texts. The scriptures must be brought to life through the use of vivid recognizeable images which

God Jesus Christ and The Holy Spirit, along with the women and men of the scriptural accounts have been imprisoned in a place of unreality, and untouchability by the sermons that are crowded with quotes made by famous people or cute little anecdotes or jokes. These serve only to distract the person in the pew from the biblical text rather than open it up for them.

All too often these same scriptures have been rendered lifeless by presuppositions and traditional thought. Webster defines the term presupposition as "something supposed or assumed beforehand." "To presuppose is to take for granted. The definition goes on: to presuppose is to require or imply as a preceding condition." For example: To presuppose that the authority of commentaries, or even hundreds of years of a singular traditional interpretation of scripture, constitutes the right, or the only valid interpretation of the scripture limits our experience of the text, its milieu and, consequently, our experience of God. There is no doubt that we come to a text with presuppositions, particularly if we have preached on it before or recently heard someone we respect and admire preach on it.

¹ "Presume," Webster's New World Dictionary Of The American Language, 2nd ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980).

(Although sometimes hearing another's bad interpretation can fuel our own interpretive fire.) Even if we are beginners at reading and interpreting the Bible it is likely that, because of our up-bringing in a predominantly Judeo-Christian society, we have heard at least snippets of stories, or sayings of Jesus whether we were aware of it or not. We are now a video society exposed to the often impoverished attempts of Hollywood directors to interpret the Bible. These are the influences we must be aware of in order to accomplish the task of renewing the scriptural memory of the Christian community.

The preacher is often loathe to break with the traditional interpretation of a given scripture because of time constraints or uneasiness about the response the listeners in the pew may give. If that is the case and the preacher ends up preaching around the text using the canned illustrations provided by "pulpit help kits", then there is little hope that the folks who are listening will make any kind of theological or personal connection with the biblical passage. To make matters worse, they probably heard the scripture some ten minutes prior to the actual sermon, read by someone who does not yet know its O.K. to read scripture with inflection.

This book is designed to help preachers and

teachers and laypeople ask questions of the text which will bring new insights about the scripture to the fore. This book also seeks to demonstrate how a new body of "modern midrash" can be produced out of our own wellspring of experiences. We can create modern midrash in the form of interpretive stories and enliven our experience of God.

My intention is not to produce another book of story sermons. I have used the term "midrash" to refer to the writings for a very specific reason. The term refers to already existing holy writings on Hebrew Scripture and by using the term to name a body of literature that is uniquely Christian I hope to stimulate movement in a similar direction on the part of the Christian community. One day in the future of the Christian experience, might there be a compilation of "Holy Christian Midrashim" which would be used in our worship as an authoritative adjunct to the New Testament Canon?

Is creating Midrash, in fact, part of what Steve Delamarter refers to as the "Canonical Process?" Writes Delamarter:

"When a community believes a body of literature to be of divine origin or to convey a message of divine origin,

that literature becomes elevated to the status of Scripture. That is to say it is deemed "holy".²

For Scripture to be dubbed canonical the community involved with that Scripture makes a decision

to take these books which record revelations from the past and make them the locus of continuing guidance for the community of faith in the present. The community voluntarily enters into a relationship in which her present existence is to be viewed and judged in the light of that literature.³

Not only does the community of faith define its relationship with God through that Scripture designated Canon, but the community of faith assigns new interpretations to that literature with each epoch of its history. These interpretations are referred to as the community's "hermeneutic".

A Hermeneutic is a particular "recipe" of theological ideas which the tradent brings to the text and in the light of which s/he reads the text.⁴

Therefore one's view of God or the faith community's present view of God and themselves has everything to do with their understanding of Scripture.

²Steve Delamarter, "A Comparative Midrash Approach To the Study Of The New Testament: A Student Handbook," Photocopy, Claremont, CA, 1986, p. 9.

³ Ibid., 9.

⁴ Ibid., 5.

Delamarter had introduced the terms "re-presentation" and "resignification" as part of the Canonical Process. The community re-presents and resignifies Scripture by applying its own hermeneutic and its historical context to its understanding of a particular Scripture. ⁵

Creating midrash, then, can be viewed as part of the Canonical Process. Midrash is a written record of the re-presentation and the resignification process of a given community of faith interacting with Scripture.

The sample literature contained in this project are the by-products of my own interaction with Scripture and with the Spirit of God that stirs within me. These are re-presentations and resignifications of the Scripture contained within the New Testament Canon and are assigned a hermeneutic which reflects a twentieth century historical context and the world view of a middle aged single white woman living and working in the United States, specifically Los Angeles, California.

I have confined my definition of midrash to the particular form known as the *Haggadah* or *Aggadah* which were ancient Hebrew narratives compiled about the middle

⁵Ibid., 5-6.

of the second Christian Century. * They take the form of story and are used to interpret narrative portions of the Hebrew Scripture. They are "holy" writings having received their sacred status and authority from rabbinic Judaism. They began as stories which grew out of the everyday experiences of ordinary folks.

I have chosen not to debate the issue of what can and cannot be classified as midrash, nor will I try to narrow the very broad definition of midrash. On the contrary it is the broad definition which makes possible its revitalization and utilization in this modern era. The stories found in the following chapters I have referred to as original pieces of New Testament midrash and are offered for the nourishment of the Christian community.

At the risk of opening a can of "eccumenical" worms regarding the issues of "what" or "who" determines the holiness of sacredness of any documents within the Christian community, I think that writing and compiling modern midrash on the New Testament may offer an alternative to wishing and hoping that someday the canon will be opened. The obvious question that arises from such

* I. Epstein, "Midrash," Interpreter's Dictionary Of The Bible, ed. George Buttrick et al. vol.3 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), 376.

a proposal is: "Who in the vast melting pot of Christianity could or would take on the task of determining the authority of such writings?"

Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the Community of faith which is the heart of the Canonical process. Our understanding has been that the canonization of scripture has been in the hands of a few "men" representing the orthodoxy of the faith community. But if, as Delamarter suggests, the faith community determines the revelatory significance of scripture or literature based on scripture there is Hope for New Testament Midrash. There is little hope that the New Testament Canon will be opened for the purpose of adding other writings believed to be of divine origin or which are believed to contain a message of divine origin, but there is hope for new midrash to interpret the New Testament Canon.

I think that the common memory of the Christian community is in sufficient jeopardy by virtue of its chronological distance from the original stories that it is time we explored the possibility of creating and compiling a body of midrash assigning our modern day "hermeneutic" to our New Testament Scripture.

The need for the new, in my opinion, is obvious. The limits of the New Testament Canon were established by

male dominated hierarchically structured orthodox communions. Males set the limits, because males dominated the intellectual and religious communities of entire cultures and societies. It took centuries to decide what texts would make up the New Testament Canon which is described as the Four Gospels and the thirteen Epistles of St. Paul as of the year 130 of the common era. The other writings were received into the canon later on. ⁷

The problem of giving authority to a New Testament midrash stems from the principle belief that "only the Church has the right to declare a book canonical." ⁸ The term "The Church" in the previous sentence refers to the Roman Catholic Church, The Orthodox Churches and the Church Of England. ⁹ Herein lies the problem: Protestants have no singular authoritative body.

There are no writings outside the Canon which are dubbed "holy." This includes the Apochrypha which are branded heretical and therefore only imitate holy scripture. The Apochrypha carries some weight in the scholastic community as an interesting resource and (secret) companion to the scriptures, but the writings are

⁷ "The Canon", The Oxford Dictionary Of The Christian Church, eds. F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingston, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974) 232.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

gnostic and called illegitimate and will likely never be preached from Christian pulpits. They are, however, compiled as a separate set and source of worthy writings that imitate holy scripture.

Midrash does not intend to imitate scripture, only to interpret it more effectively for today's ears. Midrash can take us far beyond Apochrypha, for it does not claim to be scripture, but rather an explanation of scripture. Modern midrash for the New Testament may help to move us beyond sexist exegetical interpretation of scripture by including the interpretive stories of women scholars, laity and clergy, as well as those writings of awakened male scholars laity and clergy alike.

Women exegetes and preachers have given life to the women who dwell in the canonical scriptures by boldly telling their stories. Both men and women scholars have worked diligently to squelch the age old rumors that claim Mary Magdalene was a prostitute and Junia, the Apostle was really a man.¹⁰

It is time, now, to take a daring second step toward legitimizing women's stories and their unique experience of God. Midrash, accepted as an authoritative

¹⁰ Leonard Swidler, Biblical Affirmations Of Woman (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 207-208, 299.

form, allows us to interpret and retell the stories of the men and women of the scripture in a language and context meaningful for the Bible-hungry Christians of today.

It is through our modern midrash that we will renew our common memory as ancient midrash did for the Jewish community at a time when the Jewish people were centuries removed from the stories and legends which gave birth to the Hebrew scriptures.

Perhaps I presume too much, when I suggest that the variety of writings offered herein are midrashim. However, they can at least serve as useful guides for those exegetes and preachers who will, one day, write midrash worthy of entry into the book of "Holy Christian Midrash."

Chapter 2:

Why Use the Term Midrash?

Why use the term Midrash at all when referring to stories which interpret the New Testament Scriptures? The term Midrash refers to a unique body of interpretive literature. In an article entitled Midrash, Renee Bloch states:

It is important to give the word midrash its true meaning. It is often taken as a synonym for fable or moral legend. Actually, it designates an edifying and explanatory genre closely tied to Scripture, in which the role of amplification is real but secondary and always remains subordinate to the primary religious end, which is to show the full import of the work of God, the Word of God." ¹

Bloch goes on to say:

In a more special sense midrash (plural: *midrashim*) designates something written for the purpose of interpreting the Bible, usually homiletical, like the Midrash Rabbah, which is a commentary on the Pentateuch (and the five Megillot). ²

Bloch defines "the essential and fundamental characteristics of midrash" as follows: initiated in scripture, homiletical, adaptive to the present, practical in its

¹ Renee Bloch, "Midrash," Approaches To Ancient Judaism: Theory and Practice, ed. William Scott Green (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978), 29.

² Ibid., 31.

goal, which is "to define the lessons for faith and for the religious way of life contained in the biblical text." ³

The two types of midrash which can be distinguished are: *Halakah and Aggadah*. "The first deals primarily with the legal parts of the Torah" and "the other relates particularly to the narrative parts of the Torah and seeks to define the meaning of the stories and the events of history." ⁴

"Aggadah, which is very rich and of great religious value, has given rise to a vast literature, which included homilies and commentaries following the biblical books. (These "commentaries" are very different from the writings to which this name is given today, which are, rather, expositions that take the text as a point of departure, like certain patristic commentaries and "treatises.")" ⁵

Elie Wiesel reminds us that the personages who dwell in scripture really and truly lived. He utilizes the biblical and midrashic texts of his Jewish tradition to

³ Ibid., 31

⁴ Ibid., 31

⁵ Ibid., 31-34

reconstruct their portraits for his readers. He is able to imagine Isaac on the altar and cries. He has visualized Joseph, prince of Egypt, and has laughed. * What Wiesel states about the faces and voices of the Hebrew Scripture holds true, in my opinion for the faces and voices of the new Testament as well.

Because the New Testament lifts up the person of Jesus Christ as its most central figure we have tended to concentrate on his face and his voice as well as how he viewed the world, God and humanity. We have left the mirror images of ourselves, that is, those scriptural characters who are, like us, part of the multitude who are oftentimes locked in the scriptural shadows where they remain unnamed and often unidentified. When we fail to see what it is we have in common with the "folks" in the scriptural stories we ascribe to them personalities that are one dimensional and lives that are experientially impotent.

An occasional character stands out in the text, but because of our Christian history has been told predominantly by men, those characters who dominate the interpretive literature of Christianity are men as well. The exception is a few unmistakably present and powerful women, like Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of Jesus

* Elie Wiesel, Messengers Of God Biblical Portraits and Legends (New York: Random House, 1976), ix.

(who is generally kept from growing into full-fledged womanhood). Other women, more often than not, remain unnamed, pulseless paper-dolls whose movement within scripture is kept static.

Writing and creating midrash for the New Testament texts calls us to breathe life and spirit into all human reflections of ourselves. When the unnamed are given identities they have faces as well, and individual personalities, foibles, idiosyncrasies, stresses, joys, sorrows, careers, and relationships with other human beings and, ultimately, with God. These characters come alive for us when we give them names, histories, personalities and then let them tell us their stories. I suggest that a task for today's preachers is to discover the sources of modern midrash that grow out of our common contextual memory. Because of our (humanity's) unique ability to communicate through the spoken and the written word, we thrive as storytellers. Multiple generations of children have shared the same nursery rhymes and fairytales and some of us have been privileged to listen to the legends and fairytales invented and handed down within our own families.

Renee Bloch insists that to compare midrash to fables and moral legends is inappropriate, but midrash

has grown out of an oral tradition, particularly the Aggadah midrash.

The authors of Taking The Fruit: Modern Women's Tales Of The Bible write: "The classic definition of Midrash is a short explanation of scripture."⁷ They explain their modern form of midrash as follows:

a modern story which attempts to bring up to date the feelings, hopes, and aspirations of contemporary women which were not written about in the passages of the biblical text.⁸

These modern writers of midrash talk about the originators of midrash as its own form:

The people must have loved hearing the fresh new interpretations of biblical themes, because over the centuries, since the time of Ezra, midrash has become one of the most important mediums of expression of Jewish thought and teaching. Much of the source material for these stories originated with the common people. The fanciful ideas and colorful outpourings were part of the oral tradition or the legends, sayings and folklore of the people. If the stories were important and could be used to explicate a text, they were eventually brought into the academies by the rabbis, reworked, given the rabbinic stamp of approval, and in turn became part of the weavings of written midrashim.⁹

⁷ Jane Sprague Zones, et. al., Taking The Fruit: Modern Women's Tales Of The Bible (San Diego: Women's Institute For Continuing Jewish Education, 1981) 8.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. 9.

The women writing modern midrash in San Diego have suggested that ancient midrash has its roots in the lore of the folks. They have expanded the stories as they exist within the biblical text, going beyond the margins of the text to build a broader picture of the events of a given story, particularly those of biblical women.

Perhaps it is presumptuous of me to suggest that Christians write midrash on the New Testament texts. I suppose I could invent a catchy word which would then distinguish Christian midrash from Jewish midrash but I think I will leave that task to that high ecumenical authority who will be compiling the midrashim of Christian writers.

How will we write midrash? We make up the modern day population of folk. We have our own folklore embedded in our memories. The heritage of entire families, even today, is instilled in the memories of children and grandchildren through stories, designed to teach, counsel and entertain. They are stories about our ancestors, amplified and embellished as is the custom of oral tradition. We are empowered by this our own folkloric tradition to create stories on the biblical texts especially when those texts trouble and confound us or which seem to paint an incomplete picture of an event because some character has remained nameless.

Let me explain further what I mean by our own folklore. One of my ancestors, Captain Cyprian Southack so I have been told was given a large portion of Beacon Hill property in "Boston as a gift from the King Of England. He was the first sea captain to chart the Northern New England Coast all the way to Canada. When he presented his maps to his King his reward was the Boston property. His great great grndchildren succeeded in gambling the property away. There is a door which honors him in the Old North Church in Boston. The Captain is part of my heritage. His name has reached its last generation. There are no more Southacks to carry on the name, but his story lives as long as I do and as long as his achievements are valued by the generations who will learn from me.

Some of my family's folklore has been instilled by repetition. When we spent our summers with maternal grandparents in Maine, the best way to stay up a few minutes later at bedtime was to get my grandfather to tell us an "egg story" or the silly story about his Auntie Helen and the napkin that wouldn't stay on her lap. The egg stories were about my grandfather's continual attempts to avoid eating eggs. It was a struggle when chickens were laying eggs with his name printed right on them. The

story of Auntie Helen is a wonderful description of a formal dinner complete with servants, and much pomp and Victorian circumstance that my baby-boomer eyes will never see.

The stories take root and have meaning because they are about people who are, or were, real to someone. Without a doubt, the characters existed and, to some extent the circumstances of the story in which they appear. The images are colorful, and the activity is familiar, as are the feelings expressed by the storyteller. I never knew Auntie Helen, in real life, but I know she wore a slippery red dress and pearls. I know that she was so fat that she had no lap. I know that when her linen napkin kept slipping off her taffeta, fat lap, that she was just as annoyed and embarrassed as the butler who kept handing her a new one. I know too, that she was too proud to show her mortification when the butler snatched the third napkin to fall to the floor and slammed it onto the table beside Auntie Helen's plate and said: "Here, hang onto it this time!" To some extent then, I knew a woman who I call "my" great, great, Auntie Helen because she has been given to me by my grandfather as an integral part of my memory.

Midrash as interpretive story based on scripture

can make the biblical texts live in our memory in much the same way as the family folklore. Midrash as story grows out of a folkloric oral tradition so it is comparable then to our own family folktales, except for one major point; they are interpretive pieces on holy scripture addressing the text's specific theological intention. If we have a point of identity with the characters of the story or the setting of the story, its theological context can come alive in our memory. As with family folklore the point of contact with scripture for the reader/hearer can occur in a variety of ways. That contact being, with the storyteller him/herself, the individuals characters playing parts in the story, or the setting and circumstance of the story.

There is hope for a new midrash written and compiled on New Testament texts. Producing such midrash will be less of a problem than compiling worthy examples of it into books which will benefit the entire Christian community. The very existence of denominations, sects and communions of opposing orthodoxies find requires that we search for an authoritative group to legitimize New Testament Midrash.

Jacob Neusner writes:

The earliest midrash compilations spoke not for an individual, but for the collectivity of sages; they demanded and gained a place within the canon of rabbinical writings, thus entering the Torah.... The compositions themselves claimed authority. So they took their place as statements of Judaism in

the literature of Judaism. They were holy. And, being holy, they had to be brought into relationship with other, holy books.¹⁰

How does literature come to be identified as "holy" literature? In the Christian community the term "holy" is applied to scripture, creeds, papal decrees, sacraments, and encyclicals. How can modern midrash hope to move into a category as holy literature? Can an interpretive exegesis, in story form, which uses a New Testament text as its point of departure, qualify as revelation?

The twin issues of revelation and canon frame the question in theological language. but the facts upon which theology meditates and to which theology assigns meaning derive, to begin with, from the history of literature: the story of the formation of particular holy books and their reception sanctification within the believing community. the definition of the canon after all, hardly demands attention, except for books people want to put there. When does the dilemma of ongoing revelation in a historical community, a community already defined by the increment and authority of revelation received in times past, become acute? It is only when new claims to say the word of God insistently press from latter-day saints. Then the entire foundations of the authority of scripture come under close scrutiny within the community of the faithful because of, not doubt about old, but vivid faith in the new, writings." "

¹⁰ Jacob Neusner, Midrash In Context (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), xiv.

¹¹ Ibid., xv.

In this particular era of human history the authority of scripture has come under close scrutiny within the community of the faithful. North Americans often doubt the old and long for a vivid faith in the new. One large doubt refers to what is missing in the scriptures with regard to the contribution made by women. God has spoken to and through women throughout all of the Judeo-Christian centuries, but our stories have not been legitimized by being included in the holy scriptures. The new writings that are long overdue are the tales of the women who accompanied the men of scripture through the floods, the exiles and the holy wars. We who will write the stories of those women are invited to write the stories of forgotten and misunderstood men as well.

What follows is an excerpt of a modern midrash, that is an interpretive piece, a story whose point of departure is a familiar passage of Hebrew scripture. This modern tale rescues a much maligned woman of the Bible from thousands of years of ridicule and misunderstanding. She is given the name Tova. She is best known for her appearance in Genesis chapter 19 verse 26. As the story opens Tova is madly rushing around trying to collect all of the belongings that can be carried by she and the members of her family. She has been instructed by the angels sent from God to leave her home in Sodom because

the city is going to be destroyed utterly. As she packs she calls to mind her neighbors and their children and their past kindness to her. She begins to cry a constant rain of tears as she grieves for her friends and their innocent children. The climactic ending of this midrash about Lot's wife who looked back in sorrow on the destruction of Sodom re-presents and resignifies for us the symbolism of a pillar of salt.

Tova couldn't understand why she and Lot were chosen to be saved. She knew they did their best to do what was right, but they weren't perfect. Who was? And what about the babies and the innocent children? Why couldn't God just destroy the people who were really evil? Why destroy everyone?

Tova heard Lot and the men sent by God calling to her. She took a last look around, tightened her arms around her bundles, called to her daughters and ran out to meet them.

As they fled down the street, Tova heard one of the men say, "Flee for your life, do not look back." She felt something in her eye and as she brushed her hand across her face, she felt the salty residue that had been left by her tears. At that moment, Tova's heart was so heavy with sadness and pity for those who were left behind, that she could go no further. She turned to look back for one last time.

God saw Tova and felt her anguish and compassion. God knew that Tova could never be happy knowing she had survived while everyone else had been killed. God knew what to do. As Tova turned to look back, God changed her into a pillar of salt. For just as Tova's tears evaporated leaving their salty residue, Tova's spirit evaporated, leaving forever a monument to her deep feelings of love and caring--a monument made from the condensation of Tova's compassion. ¹²

¹² Zones, ed., 32-35.

The author's of this story have called it a "modern woman's tale". Its form, however, is that of midrash. I offer this as an example of what has already been created by feminist writers on the Hebrew scriptures. The story of "Tova" has traditionally been exegeted by men who preferred to think that Lot's wife was punished by God for looking back on sin. She has, at last, been rescued and lifted up as a symbol of women's compassion for one another and all of humankind.

Some may well question the need for creating a body of midrash on the New Testament scripture. But the process has already begun with the birth of the latest genre of sermon--the story sermon--and its growing acceptance in the preaching community. The story sermon succeeds in promoting theological thinking on the part of the listener where the three point sermon fails. Often the three point sermon serves only to display a preacher's ability to pronounce multisyllabic jargon which has little if no significance for the ear that is loyally and devotedly trying to listen and learn about God.

Interpretive stories written as midrash have the potential for giving those who are intimidated by the Bible or who have felt excluded by it a whole new experience of God's story. Midrash offers us a whole new memory of experiences of God which grow out of our common

lore as humans who communicate with God now at this moment in history. To create midrash is to say that God did not stop communicating with humanity with the final sentences of the Book of Revelation, but that God is continually revealed to humanity through faith in Christ Jesus and through the inspired stories spoken by the mouths of the faith-full.

CHAPTER 3

A Method for Writing Midrash

I have not, to date, encountered a step by step method of developing a midrash. I heartily believe that a practical, step-by-step method will help the enthusiastic beginner get started and thus move us closer to the compilation of our holy book.

Today's preachers and teachers in the church are faced with a plethora of newcomers to the church. Folks are walking through the doors of the Sunday morning sanctuary who are for all intents and purposes unchurched. Within that body of newcomers lies a considerably large body of "oldcomers" who have never really grasped the biblical "big picture" either.

This book is intended to help the first year seminarian as well as the pastor of many years who is baffled by the latest trends in preaching, particularly the story-telling method of preaching.

The creative practical method which follows does not preclude the necessary, legitimate, study of the historical, biblical, theological and canonical context of the scripture. The criticism is included as one of the steps. The method in its entirety is designed to help the preacher/teacher create vivid, theologically significant, moving word pictures which

grow out of his or her own experience of the text and yet will be familiar to the ears of those who shall hear.

Step 1: Choosing The Pericope

The stories that have survived the scrutiny of editors and publishers, and which may someday be compiled into a book of Holy Christian Midrash, have tended to address the more familiar narratives and parables of the Gospels. They have also tended to center around the more traditionally prominent characters.

Do not be afraid to use the lectionary. As a matter of fact dare, to use the lectionary and let your stories grow out of your study of the pericope that confounds you most.

I have admired Frederick Buechner for giving medicare cards to Abraham and Sarah and for putting poor Pontius Pilate through the trauma of quitting smoking on the very day he sentenced the Christ.¹ He has influenced my story telling methods greatly. Martin Bell has used animal metaphors for God, Christ and the multitudes in his book, The Way Of The Wolf.² Perhaps theirs will be among

¹Frederick Buechner, Telling the Truth: The Gospel As Tragedy, Comedy And Fairytale (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977), 50.

²Martin Bell, The Way Of The Wolf The Gospel In New Images (New York: Seabury, 1968), 11-18.

the first entries into our Holy Book Of Christian Midrash. They have dealt with familiar stories, characters and texts. I contend that new characters can be revealed by exploring and expanding the margins of texts we would ordinarily avoid .

If you use the lectionary, read the assigned scriptures with an eye to creating midrash. You may find that you do not choose a pericope, but rather the pericope chooses you. When the scriptures prescribed by the lectionary are most confounding and you feel inclined to make excuses for what is written, that is the time to write midrash. Furthermore, do not take the seemingly straightforward scriptures for granted. The Christmas Eve Story, and the Journey of the Magi, The Crucifixion story, and the Resurrection accounts are often left as is, but they are stories ripe for modern midrash. I have included sample midrashim on three of the above mentioned texts in the chapters that follow.

Step II: Expanding Or Setting The Limits Of Your Pericope

The pericopes offered in the lectionary are not isolated from the material that surrounds them. The writer may need to read the entire Gospel, or the entire chapter, which surrounds the pericope if he or she has not done so recently. Read it. Don't get bogged down with

it, just read it. Take note of the material that precedes and follows your selected passage. Do not be intimidated by paragraph identations or punctuation marks. You may decide to develop your midrash on a single line of scripture or extend the perimeters of the pericope to clarify its chronological movement.

Expanding the pericope can better communicate "the sense" of the passage. For example, in Luke's chapter nine, verses 10-17 are generally isolated as a single pericope. The writer of midrash to read verses 1-9, which tell the story of the disciples adventure into the wilderness to try their wings--so to speak--as healers and evangelists. The feeding of the multitudes (vs.10-17) occurs upon their immediate return. The disciples have been endeavoring to tell Jesus of their adventures on the road and their time is encroached upon by this vast multitude of hungry people. They want them sent away to fetch their own food. I would imagine, they have a variety of reasons, not the least of which is practicality. Also they would probably like to have Jesus undivided attention. The element of manipulating the situation comes to play in the suggestion that the people go and find food. But Jesus's response is one of impatience as if he is well aware of their personal motives. How do they feel when he says: "You give them something to eat!" Are they about to pout, and say: "But Jesus we just got

back and we are tired." The writer having read the entire chapter now has more information at his or her disposal regarding the circumstances surrounding this particular feeding story.

I share with you yet another example of expansion of a pericope in order to see how it relates to the larger text. Such an exercise might very well change your original thoughts about the meaning of the text. I refer to the story of the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7, verses 24-30. In verses 14-23 of that same chapter, Mark shows Jesus expounding on the statement: "there is nothing outside a man (sic) which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him." On the heels of these words follows the story of the Syrophoenician woman who seeks Jesus out during his R&R in Tyre and Sidon. She asks for his help, that he might cast out the evil demon which possesses her daughter. She is rebuffed directly by words that Mark says came from the mouth of Jesus: "Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." What comes out of the mouth of Jesus regarding this gentile woman is that because she is a gentile and not one of the children of Israel, she is a pagan dog and is not worthy to receive the food provided exclusively for the children of Israel by God.

The Syrophoenician woman, fortunately, has the presence of mind to straighten him out, immediately opening the door for Jesus' ministry to the gentiles. She humbly reminds him that "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." It is hard for many people to imagine Jesus learning something new or being called to account for words thoughtlessly proffered. However, I find it a very graceful experience to believe that Jesus learned from humans and at times put his foot in his mouth just as we do.

Lastly, in choosing your pericope, whether it is a passage from the Gospels, the Epistles, the book of Revelation, or the book of Acts, do not be intimidated by it and do not take it for granted. The passage deserves its midrash, for all scripture deserves to be renewed in the common memory of the Christian community.

Step III: What Is It in the Pericope that Captures your
Creative Imagination?

Are there words that leap out from the page at you?

Take a look, I'll wait. Burton Mack, a New Testament Scholar, teaches the importance of looking for the action verbs in a passage.³ For example, in Mark's chapter

³Burton Mack, Course on "The Gospel Of Mark," School Of Theology at Claremont, CA., Fall, 1981.

10, Blind Bartimeus, "throws off" his mantle and "springs up" to come to Jesus. Imagine the picture of a blind man leaping to his feet without benefit of guide dog or cane. Was Blind Bartimeus still blind when he leapt up when he sprang to his feet. My high school English teacher, Colonel Mosley, taught us to use "Le Mot Juste" which translated from the French means "the right word". He did not allow the verb "to be" in book reports requiring that we use "action verbs" only, no matter how flowery or graphic. The words that leap out of the text at you are the ones telling the story.

During this third step you begin to discover what kind of research will be necessary in order to develop your midrash. Here is where the questioning process begins. Write down your questions as they come to mind.

Look at your scripture. Where is it taking place? What do you know about that place? Be very careful with any presuppositions that you may already have about the text. When I preached an Eastertide sermon on the traditional "Road To Emmaus" text, I asked one very simple question of the text and my first midrash was born. "Where in heaven's name is Emmaus?" I asked a friend, an Episcopal priest, "Where were they going do you think?" "Home," he said. I decided they were not going home. And if they were not going home, why head for Emmaus? What, I asked, was in Emmaus? With that question

my imagination began its journey into a whole new world, beyond the margins of the text and beyond the traditional portraits of the story. This led to an invention that gives a new sense to the theme of the resurrection as it appears in this passage of scripture. From this questioning process, I realized that one of the first steps in my up-coming research was to find Emmaus.

Remember that your exegetical process is guided by what you allow yourself to see in the scripture. For instance, when you see the phrase "the twelve" who comes to mind? Whose list of disciples comes to mind? Do you see individual faces or just a group of nondescript "men." Do you include Judas in the list? He was not forever and always the Judas depicted in the accounts of the last supper. The point I am trying to make here is that when we use the term "the twelve" in midrash, their parts as individual characters in a story should be researched as well. What is known about them? What would you do, for example, if as Luke suggests you had the ominous task of pairing off the disciples. Who would you send out two by two to heal people and cast out demons? Would you put Simon the zealot and Judas Iscariot together? How about Peter and Thomas? I am already picturing villages in a state of upheaval when these pairs enter and exit again. How about Peter and Matthew? We can only imagine how Jesus accomplished the task, but

there are at least 6 possible stories for the adventurous writer of midrash on the topic of discipleship.

Step IV: Exegesis and Discovering the Biblical Theological
Intention of Your Chosen Pericope

Any preacher knows that he or she must complete the exegetical task by getting at the theological intention of the author or the community who shaped the scripture. In order to discover the theological intention however we are obliged to do the historical and form critical analysis of the text.

The purpose of writing midrash is not to discount the original theological intention of the scripture, but rather to breathe new life into it, to give it life and relevance for today. The preceding step and this one are very closely tied together. You will be using the questions that you formulated in the previous step to help you determine what details of the text you need to research. The example cited in the previous step, regarding research on the town of Emmaus was one in which one question lead to another, and so on until my curiosity was satisfied. I needed to find out where the town was; what it was known for, it's distance from Jerusalem, its population, and so forth. What I found, was that it no longer existed and that the archeological

experts were not sure when or where it had existed. With this discovery, I was free to create a town out of my imagination the evolution of which would, at one point in history, touch the lives of two of Christ's disciples and the resurrected Christ.

The research process brings about more questioning and more questioning brings about more research until your curiosity is sated. Now ask, "What is the theological intention of this passage of scripture? What does the scripture intend to tell us about God? How is God's presence discovered or known in the scripture? How does God's presence in the scripture translate to this moment in human history?" Remember, our own societal and cultural evolution cannot be discounted when determining theological intention. This is to say, that the present is part and parcel of God's universal time, and cannot be relegated to a place of illegitimacy simply because it confounds us.

The aim of midrash is to clarify, for us God's expectations, God's surprises, God's commitment, God's absolute presence and transcendence in the images and language of our time. The writer of midrash must not only try and discover (as closely as possible) what the text meant to its author, but he or she must also try and discover how the author's words have been understood by

centuries of audiences. Each audience hears with ears that are directly affected by their societal and cultural evolution up to that point in time. The ears of the audiences not only belonged to different cultures and societies, but were of different genders and ages as well. Is God liberating these people, rescuing them, challenging them, calling them to account, or cradling them in comforting arms?

Step V: Who is My Audience and What is the Occasion?

Who is your audience? Who they are will determine where you can and will take them. Are you writing midrash for unemployed steelworkers in Pittsburg, or are you writing for a self-conscious group of affluent, frightened yuppies?

Are you writing this midrash for a special occasion? What is the liturgical season? What is its theological theme? Is it Good Friday, when all believers are called to experience an honest grief? Without the tears of Good Friday, what reason is there to celebrate Easter Sunday. Or is the occasion of your midrash Easter Sunday, a day filled to overflowing with the power of God? The raw emotions of the Easter scriptures run the gamut of grief and terror to elation and incredulity. The occasions for writing midrash are as many and varied as

the seasons of the church year. Each season or special day has a flavor all its own. The special occasions of the church are colorful as well. When considering the scripture, consider the occasion for which it is used as well. Is passion really part of Passion Sunday? What color is it? What color is Pentecost? What does it feel like to swallow the spirit of God and then tell the world what it tastes like?

Have you chosen a parable as your midrash text? The theme of the liturgical season can be absolutely relevant in our utilization of parable. Parables are useful for accomplishing a wide variety of hermeneutics. They are therefore useful for creating a wide variety of midrash. The Good Samaritan is told over and over again with different characters playing the various key roles. Its parabolic significance remains the same as long as the obvious tension between the protagonist and the victim is maintained. The theological intention remains the same even when the Good Samaritan is played by a homosexual and the victim is Lyndon LaRouche. Midrash can give relevance to texts that have frightened and confounded us and which we have avoided as too theologically judgemental. Making the effort to write midrash invites the possibility of interpretive significance not as yet discovered.

I have touched briefly on the subject of feelings. There are feelings and emotions that go along with certain occasions and certain texts. We need not shy away from endowing the characters that live in our midrashim with human emotions. If we give credence to the emotions of the characters in the scriptural texts and to our own emotions as well, perhaps we will aid in the eventual rescue of today's Christians from a kind of self-imposed spiritual impotence. I am not suggesting that the pulpit be turned into a three ring emotional circus, I do think however, that the feelings of biblical characters have often been ignored and if examined may give more of us permission to acknowledge our own. The scriptural characters are reflections of real honest to goodness human beings and therefore reflections of ourselves. Identifying the occasion and the mood of that occasion as experienced by the scriptural participants adds a very necessary human element that is, all too often, edited out, and practically censored in middle of the road pulpits for fear that any discussion of emotion will compromise the intellectual and rational integrity of the sermon.

Step VI: Producing Your Midrash Or Setting the Stage.

At this point in time I will ask you to set out various imaginary hats. Writing midrash is much like

writing producing and directing a play. Your midrash must have movement, color, drama, sound, a well constructed set and maybe even costumes that draw the eye. In order to put on a production you must have a script, a stage, a set, and characters to play the parts on your stage. Your midrash must be vivid. Its set is only as exciting as the word pictures you can create. Your characters are going to act out their lives for us and although their performances should be natural they must be dramatic enough to draw our attention. Perhaps then we will see our reflections in them.

First, put on the Playwrite's Hat: You have done a good deal of ground work for the writing of your script already. By now, you have a fairly good idea of where your characters have been. You must now decide where it is they are going. How does your play open? Set the scene: Place, Time, Century, time of day, special occasion or event. Who will be on stage when the curtain on your midrash opens? Who are the principles? Do they have names? Are unnamed characters present in the scriptural text. who deserve names and individual identities on your midrashic stage? Are there invisible characters who may live beyond the lateral margins of the biblical text and who are standing in the wings of your midrashic stage

waiting to make an entrance and possibly upstage one of the principles?

As playwright, you are responsible for the characters' dialogue. How do they talk? Are their voices strong or weak, caustic or tender? Do they speak with accents? Are they from a foreign country, or another part of the country speaking with a tell-tale drawl? Perhaps one of your characters drops her "R"'s and adds them to the end of words that "ahn't" supposed to have them, such as "idear". She is probably from the East Coast. Why are your characters in the scene? How did they get there? Have they just arrived? Are they about to leave? Where are they going? Are they travelling on business or R & R?

You have set your scene and identified your characters. How will their experience in your midrash be different from their experience in the original text? How will they play out their roles in your midrash? Where is God in your cast of characters? Where does your midrashic play begin and end? Are your characters changed by the experience or are they intentionally unchanged?

Next, put on your Director's Hat: Once you have examined the script you must determine how the characters will act out their parts. If Mary Magdalene is going to proclaim the Good News on Easter morning, just how is she going to do it? Will you in fact need to call in a

choreographer to work with her on this scene? What does the agony of Peter sound like in the moment of his denial? Will you need a sound effects expert? The Director is in charge of the entire production, but her major concern at the outset is guiding the characters in the presentation of the drama; helping them to interpret their roles, or manage their blocking. The Director gets the characters involved in the story. The characters on your midrashic stage are not static, card-board cut-outs. They move. Are they at work or at play? (Don't dismiss this as a possibility; biblical characters don't seem to get many chances to play.) Are they frantic or calm? Are they wimpy or aggressive? What kinds of expressions show on their faces? Are they breathtakingly beautiful men or women, ugly or plain, or handsome or grotesque? Are they fat or thin, vibrant or sickly? Do they know one another? Are they friends or enemies or simply strangers to one another? Are they likeable or hateful? Are they loveable or even desirable? Are they sexual and how will you direct their actions? What will be the outcome of their being together on your stage?

Remember as the playwright, you have written in the dynamic presence of God which may not always be visible on your midrashic stage. This dynamic presence may appear in a variety of forms and moves freely on the stage, in and

around and through the other characters. Is God's presence revealed? If so, How, or by whom? Is God's presence known in some miraculous event or in an invitational phrase, a proclamation, or perhaps the punchline of a parabolic ending?

The detail work is accomplished by the set and costume designers, the lighting manager and the propmaster. Put on your Designer's Detail Hat and examine the playwrights setting for the midrash. What colors are you using for the set? What kind of terrain is depicted on the backdrop? What do the buildings look like? Is the setting rustic, or woody or is it art-deco urban? Should your set be a seascape? Is the water pounding against a sandy shore or is it as smooth as glass? Is it rippled with the sun dancing like a million shimmering diamonds on its surface? How will you light the stage for atmosphere? Is it dawn? What color is dawn? What does your midrashic morning feel like? Is it muggy and warm? Is it crisp and cool? Perhaps the playwright has set the scene for midday or evening. These times of the day may well require different lighting. How is the weather affecting your scene? Is it windy, dark and stormy or hot and sunny with a balmy breeze blowing? The atmosphere affects the mood. How will it feel to be a character on this set? What kinds of sounds can be heard? Are there any distinct odors in the air? Does the

smell attract your characters or repel them causing their noses to scrunch up and recoil?

What about your props and costumes? Is the rich young man going to ride a camel or drive a Firebird Transam, or maybe even a BMW? Will Peter wear a loincloth and sandals or big black rubber boots that smell of dead herring? Will Mary Magdalene wear rings on her fingers and toes or hightops, or maybe even Birkenstocks? Are the Pharisees and Sadducees wearing period long robes or clerical collars? Does Blind Bartimeus have a white cane and a seeing-eye dog? Is the woman at the well carrying a water jug or she wearing a waitress uniform and saying "Kiss my grits" alot. Be warned, the Director may decide to mix up the images for a theater of the absurd, avant-gard effect.

Step VII: Write The Manuscript And Try It Out

This step is two fold. By this time you have your rough draft put together and it is a complete story. Read it quickly to determine if it accomplishes the sense and theological intention. Make the necessary corrections, deletions and expansions to your text. Keep the story moving. If it bogs down in the middle, pick up the pace. Revelation awaits the final curtain.

The second part of this step is the most important

editorial portion. Read your midrash outloud to yourself or to a friend. You will hear the weak spots as you read aloud. Mark them. You will learn much in what your friend hears as well. You will notice, as you are reading, those spots where details are missing or where characterizations are inconsistent. Make the changes, and then, put the manuscript down until tomorrow. When you next review your manuscript be sure you have no distractions to draw your attention away from your reading. Relax and entertain yourself with this reading of your midrash. Play the parts of your characters. Read it from beginning to end, non-stop. How do you feel? If you are moved, If you feel something for the characters in your midrash, then you have given them life. If you are moved, you have probably found the dynamic presence of God that lives in your midrash. It is good to be moved by your own work; chances are someone else will be too. Now PREACH IT!

CHAPTER 4

Crucifixion Midrash

Some folks learn better by example than by following the steps of a prescribed method. By examining examples of Midrash the budding midrash writer can determine what he or she can do better. In the following chapters I have offered examples of what I am calling my own midrash. All of them have been preached with the exception of the last two, simply because the opportunity to preach them has not arisen. Each of these interpretive stories on scripture has grown out of my own need to know more about an event, the characters involved in the event or the theological intention of the text.

I begin with midrash on the crucifixion event because it is the focal point of my faith. I preached this particular midrash at one of those "Seven last words of Christ" services and again for my own congregation. Such services are only sparsely attended by people who want to remember the event. And few preachers get down to the real tragedy of the scriptural account spending their precious 15 or 20 minutes talking around the subject or bringing up the resurrection. In these scriptures there are emotions so profound and powerful that the only place we are willing to confront them is in the movies or on television. People are allowed to be emotional in the movies or the theater or watching the soaps at home.

We can confront terror and grief alone in the privacy of our own houses, but heaven forbid we should ever confront such feelings in the sanctuary with other human beings. The best attended services of Holy Week in Southern California, are the living "theater" performances put on at the Crystal Cathedral and people pay for the privilege of seeing a Christ character crucified. I understand that the special effects are brilliant.

As Christians journey through Lent they are always moving toward the cross, but it waits in the shadows. Our congregations have been mislead in their dealings with the crucifixion event. Mine places a wire cross on the chancel on Palm Sunday and decorates it with flowers. I whimper that the cross hasn't happened yet. Some minister told them this would be a nice tradition and I ask, why not put it on the chancel on Easter Sunday when it belongs there? Its almost as though having the symbol of the cross everywhere desensitizes us to it.

If we do not participate as witnesses to the crucifixion event we have no business witnessing the resurrection. I believe that Good Friday is the most important storytelling event of the church year and it has been relegated to a place of secondary importance by Protestant Christians. It is not a time for giving hollow descriptions and expounding empty platitudes about the coming resurrection. The crucifixion is drama most profound and Good Friday is the occasion for creating midrash on the event.

Good Friday is the occasion for creating midrash on the event.

By the time I wrote the following midrash entitled "The Reader" I had written and preached four Good Friday sermons. This was my first as an ordained minister. I asked some questions of the text to get a new perspective on it. I was to preach at a "Seven last words of Christ" service and was assigned the phrase: "I thirst" out of John's Gospel. I reviewed the characters witnessing the event in all of the gospels: Mary Magdalene, Mary the (grown-up now) mother of Jesus, the other women, John, the centurion, the other two criminals, the multitude, Simon of Cyrene, and always more soldiers. I began to look for a pair of objective eyes to witness this event and expanded the perimeter of the scene, along with the lateral margins of the text. What kind of an event are we witnessing? A crucifixion? An execution! My mind immediately conjured up the execution scenes of all those "cine noir" films out of the forties and fifties. Who were the witnesses? The press. I'd already done that as an evening news cast. Who else? Who is always present at an execution whether the prisoner wants "him" there or not? Who accompanies the prisoner to the gallows, or the electric chair or the gas chamber along with the guards and the warden? THE CHAPLAIN! Might there have been such a character around for crucifixions?

If so what was this character's job? I decided to leave the character in Jerusalem at the actual time in history of the event.

The principle character could not be a rabbi or any kind of priest; instead "the Reader" evolved into a self-appointed, somewhat self-righteous, evangelist/missionary type who felt duty-bound to save the souls of those criminals about to be executed.

This new eyewitness needed to recount the story and so the midrash is written in the first person singular. The Reader is transformed during the story becoming a very familiar character, who has long been an eyewitness and participant in the event, but who has to date remained invisible. The revelation of the Reader's more familiar identity coincides with the climax of the story.

The theological intention of the scripture cannot be grasped in a few words. The theological intention of have taken a tiny part of the events significance revealing how it changed the character of the Reader. The character enters the scene from a place of relative indifference, is absorbed into it and is ultimately transformed, turned literally inside out. The Reader's continual evolution required an ever increasing participation in the scene and the events going on around him. In my exegetical work on the passage and a word

study on "thirst," I discovered Psalm 69 and gave "The Reader" the task of reciting the Psalm for the benefit of the condemned. ¹ What happened next was revelation. The Reader took on the identity of a well known anonymous character who has lived in the scriptural accounts for 2000 years.

Perhaps more than any other a crucifixion midrash requires the obvious dynamic presence of God. God's grace is reluctantly proclaimed by a changed "Reader" at the close of the story. There is no hint of a Resurrection in this midrashic drama. The crucifixion stands on its own as saving event. The Resurrection just hasn't happened yet! As writers and as theologians we must not jump the theological and scriptural gun or the crucifixion event as redemptive act is discounted. ²

¹ J.F. Ross, "Vinegar," Interpreter's Dictionary Of The Bible, ed. George Buttrick, et al. vol 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), 786.

² I used a variety of resources which are the ordinary tools of the minister in the pastorate. I found Psalm 69 by investigating the concordance for all of the material in the Hebrew scriptures which mentioned "thirst." I spent an entire semester in Seminary studying the crucifixion as a theme in all of my courses: Ethics, Mark's Gospel, a Feminist New Testament Course with Bernadette Brooten, and preaching class. I lived, slept, breathed, and ate the subject for months. Hans Reudi Weber's books on crucifixion are excellent for historical background on crucifixion as a form of capital punishment. I did further word studies on Hyssop and vinegar to discover their historical significance in the scene. Other books have been helpful for the jelling of theological insights: Werner H. Kelber, ed. The Passion In Mark (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); Peter F. Ellis, The Genius Of John (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1984).

John 19:23-30

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus they took his garments and made four parts, one for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was without seam, woven from top to bottom; so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This was to fulfill the scripture,

"They parted my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots."

So the soldiers did this. But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the scripture), "I thirst." A bowl full of vinegar stood there; so they put a sponge full of vinegar on hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, "It is finished"; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

RSV

Psalm 69

Save me, O God!
For the waters have come
up to my neck.
I sink in deep mire,
where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters,
and the flood sweeps over me.
I am weary with my crying;
my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim
with waiting for my God.

More in number than the hairs of my head
are those who hate me without cause;
mighty are those who would destroy me,
those who attack me with lies.
What I did not steal must I now restore?
O God, thou knowest my folly;
the wrongs I have done are not
hidden from thee.
Let not those who hope in thee be
put to shame through me,
O Lord God of hosts;
let not those who seek thee be
brought dishonor through me,
O God of Israel.
For it is for they sake that
I have borne reproach,
that shame has covered my face.
I have become a stranger to my brethren,
an alien to my mother's sons.

For zeal for they house has consumed me,
and the insults of those who insult thee
have fallen on me.
When I humbled my soul with fasting,
it became my reproach.
When I made sackcloth my clothing,
I became a byword to them.
I am the talk of those who sit in the gate,
and the drunkards make songs about me.

But as for me, my prayer is to thee, O Lord.
At an acceptable time, O God,
in the abundance of thy steadfast love answer me.

With thy faithful help rescue me
from sinking in the mire;
let me be delivered from my enemies
and from the deep waters.
Let not the flood sweep over me
or the deep swallow me up,
or the pit close its mouth over me.

Answer me, O Lord, for thy
steadfast love is good;
according to thy abundant mercy,
turn to me.
Hide not thy face from thy servant;
for I am in distress, make hast to
answer me.
Draw near to me, redeem me,
set me free because of my enemies!

Thou knowest my reproach,
and my shame and my dishonor;
my foes are all known to thee.
Insults have broken my heart,
so that I am in despair.
I looked for pity, but there was none;
and for comforters, but I found none.
They gave me poison for food,
and for my thirst they gave me
vinegar to drink.

Let their own table before them
become a snare;
let their sacrificial feasts be a trap.
Let their eyes be darkened, so that
they cannot see;
and make their loins tremble
continually.
Put out thy indignation upon them,
and let thy burning anger overtake them.
May their camp be a desolation,
let no one dwell in their tents.
For they persecute him whom thou
hast smitten,
and him whom thou hast wounded,
they afflict still more.
Add to them punishment upon punishment;
may they have no acquittal from thee.
Let them be blotted out of the book
of the living;
let them not be enrolled among the righteous.
But I am afflicted and in pain;
let thy salvation, O God, set me on high!

"THE READER"

"I'm a "Reader"...that is, I attend to the spiritual needs of those who are condemned to death. I am a regular these days at crucifixions. I find some comforting passage of scripture to read to the one who is about to die. Sometimes I will choose one which is more apt to stimulate the Less than "remorse-filled" criminal to repent of past sins before dying.

Execution by crucifixion is routine in the Roman system of justice. The criminals are executed publicly to discourage the masses from embarking on a professional criminal career and thus threaten the peace maintained by the Roman legions. We jews watch our own being crucified right along with the gentile criminals. The zealots are the ones who are usually punished since they are the ones who speak out against the Romans and resort to occasional acts of terrorism in the name of Yahweh. My job, as I see it, is not to judge or even to mourn the condemned, be they gentile or Jew. My mission is to bring to them the word of God as a comfort and a call to repentance. I attend all local executions and read to the dying man or woman from the scripture. They are generally not too well read which is why I usually make the scriptural selection. No one has ever requested a favorite passage, that is not until today.

Today's executuion was to be fairly routine, with only three to be crucified. I have seen days when the

crosses lined the route all the way up to Golgatha. But, today, two thieves and some "up-country" preacher whose followers insisted that he was the Messiah were the only ones to be executed. Everyone was in town for the Passover holidays which made my job even more unpleasant, for this was a time of celebrating. The wisdom of Rome is never questioned, but I had my doubts about the wisdom of executing a possible Messiah during Passover. He was a Nazarene who apparently paraded into the city with all of the pomp and circumstance of a king and then proceeded to vandalize the temple, alienating the priests, no doubt. As a matter of fact they were so outraged by his conduct and his accusations, that they put in a complaint with the Roman authorities. Anyway, to make a long story short, he was seized in the middle of the night and taken before a grand jury of the Sanhedrin where he was found guilty of conspiracy. They said he was undermining the authority of the priests. Other rumors suggested that he intended to usurp the throne of King Herod and magically overthrow the Roman emperor. That is probably why he was taken before Pontius Pilate as the emperor's representative and was sentenced by him to die for his crimes. Even though the truth of the rumors was highly unlikely, this Nazarene was among those who was executed today.

When I arrived at the crest of the hill on my rounds, I was nearest to the cross of one of the thieves

and took advantage of the opportunity to offer him a reading. As so many have before him, he spat upon me. As if outraged by my gesture he screamed in broken Latin: "Ere! Ere! The messyur is 'angin over theah. Ain't I already in wondaful compny? Gow on yoh whay readerr and laive me alone." He ranted on and was so abusive that I just opened the scroll and began to read, more to comfort myself than him.

"Save me O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is not foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood seeps over me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God."
(Ps. 69:1-3)

I don't know how I came upon this particular Psalm, but it did seem appropriate for the occasion. He screamed over my words: "Get outta heah....gow on an' babble yur nonsense for them wot cayas!" He spat again and I hastened out of range toward the next cross. The hazards of providing this service are only unpleasant, and not, as yet, harmful. As I walked along the crest of the hill I continued to read from what I had discovered was Psalm 69. It was my custom to read as I walked since in essence it announced my arrival and, in this case, helped me to regain my composure for the next ordeal.

"More in number than the hairs on my head are those who hate me without cause; Mighty are those who would destroy me, those who attack me with lies. What I did not steal must I now restore? O God, thou knowest my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from thee." (Ps. 69:4-5)

Quite pleased with myself for having discovered such an appropriate passage of scripture I arrived at the cross of the unfortunate Nazarene and looked into the eyes of the one the thief had mockingly referred to as the messiah. His eyes were full of fear and pain. They were eyes full of longing. They were thirsty eyes. "Thirsty," I hoped for the word of comfort I could bring. I was about to recite my introduction speech and suggest a passage or two, when he said: "Please continue reading the psalm." I was a bit startled that he identified the text, but almost without missing a beat I continued reading.

"Let not those who hope in thee be put to shame through me, O Lord of Hosts. Let not those who seek thee, be brought dishonor through me, O God of Israel. For it is for thy sake that I have borne reproach, that shame has covered my face. I have become a stranger to my brethren an alien to my mother's sons." (Ps. 69: 6-8)

Few people pay much attention to my reading, including the one who is dying, but on this day, this man, in spite of his pain and anguish seemed to draw comfort from the words. I could see his eyes soften as the panic and anxiety began to ease. It was as though the words I was reciting answered some burning question in his mind; as if they somehow, brought him back on course, calming the storm that had been raging within him. He began to speak the words of the psalm reciting them right along with me.

"For zeal, for thy house has consumed me and the insults of those who insult thee have fallen on me." (Ps. 69:9)

As we went on reciting the psalm together, the crumpled forms that mourned at his feet lifted their burdened backs to hear his words. Others craned their necks trying to get within earshot of his utterance. My ears heard him repeating the words of the psalm.

"But as for me, my prayer is to thee, O Lord. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of thy steadfast love answer me. With thy faithful help, rescue me, from sinking in the mire; let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters." (Ps. 69: 13-14)

The three women grew more animated. They stood at the foot of the cross, their eyes reddened and swollen listening for the words spoken by the Nazarene. I heard them, their highpitched anxious whispers: "He pleads for rescue. Perhaps Elijah will come, now, to save him."

His syllables mingled with mine. We echoed one another. Soon I realized that I echoed the words that he now proclaimed faster and more urgently that I could read them. His eyes turned upward. He strained against his broken feet trying to lift his head and look up at the heaven's.

"Let not the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the pit close its mouth over me."

He grew agitated for a moment crying out the words of the psalm. I was afraid of losing him.

...I wanted him to stay with me. I read on accompanying him.

"Answer me, O Lord, for thy steadfast love is good; according to thy abundant mercy, turn to me. Hide not thy face from thy servant; for I am in distress, make haste to answer me. Draw near to me, redeem me, set me free because of my enemies!" (Ps. 69: 16-18)

His voice was raspy, gravelly. He coughed as he choked on his words and was unable to speak or lift his head any longer. His lips were swollen cracked and dry. I picked up the reading alone as he desperately tried to wet his lips and clear his throat to speak on. But he could not force the words. His eyes held within them a look of frustrated rage. He glared at me as if commanding me to read on; as if commanding me to make his proclamation, for he no longer could.

"Thou knowest my reproach, and my shame and my dishonor;" (Ps. 69:19)

He nodded, his eyes transfixed on mine and I was compelled to read on.

"My foes are all known to thee. Zinsults have broken my heart, so that I am in despair." (Ps. 69: 19b-20)

Suddenly it was as though I was speaking his words; speaking for him, the very words his throat was too dry to utter and his lips too swollen to form. My heart raced while my hands trembled. I felt his eyes burn through my soul as I read on.

"I looked for pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none." (Ps. 69: 20b)

Something clouded my vision. My eyes were unable to focus on the passage when I realized that I was weeping. The salty water that filled my eyes watered the ground beneath my feet and I heard the Nazarene mumble..."I thirst." I looked about frantically and saw

the bowl of liquid and the sponge. I lifted the sponge to his parched lips so he might continue reciting with me. The pages in my hand, already moistened by my tears, accepted, too, the liquid that ran down the reed into my hand. I smelled the pungent odor of vinegar as it rose from my hand and with one horrified movement I threw the reed to the ground. In my haste to quench his thirst I forgot that the Romans torment the criminals by providing vinegar instead of water for their dying thirst. The smell permeated the air as I took my place in the psalm and read on, too humiliated to look upon the face of the Nazarene.

"They gave me poison for food and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." (Ps. 69: 21)

He knew. It's as though he had rehearsed the entire scenario. I gasped for breath stunned speechless by the words I had just spoken. I looked up to plead his forgiveness only in time to see his head bow low and life escape from his eyes. I turned to look out over the hill and for the first time, I noticed the faces who mocked the dead man. They had been milling and mocking the whole time, but I had accepted the cackles and chants as routine. I had never really listened to them until this moment. Stricken by my own grief and terror, I could feel only contempt for the crowd and for myself. My trembling continued. The eyes of the crucified man were dim and I

knew he could no longer hear my reading, but I picked up the psalm and read on, enraged at the watchers and the Romans.

"Let their own table before them become a snare; let their sacrificial feasts be a trap." (Ps. 69: 22)

My mouth shouted out the malediction which seethed and pushed forth from my lungs. I ranted the words of the psalm, hurling them like weapons at the crowd of on-lookers. I wanted to wound those who, like myself, were too afraid to speak out against the Roman's tyranny. I wanted to shake those who would not listen to this man. I wanted to beat and bruise those who feared his message and to trample those who didn't appear to care.

"Let your eyes be darkened", I shouted, "so you cannot see; God make your loins to tremble continually. May God pour out indignation upon you and may God's burning anger overtake you." (Ps. 69: 23)

My voice grew to a staggering crescendo as I cursed the mockers and the unbelievers with the words of the psalm. I caught in a deep breath to finish them off and choked suddenly. My mouth could not utter another word. It was as if a hand had grabbed hold of my vocal chords and hung on tight. The tight grip on my throat loosened and I tried to speak. I could only whisper, amazed at the words that fell across my lips, "May God forgive me. May God forgive us all!"

Amen

CHAPTER 5

Resurrection Midrash

Most preachers seem to enjoy preaching on resurrection narratives, particularly the Easter stories. Some might question the idea of proposing midrash on these narratives because they stand alone so well. Precisely because of that assumption, we must write midrash. Many of us Protestants are hesitant to get excited in our worship services. We do not want to be mistaken for what our parents and grandparents called "holy rollers." So some of the more exciting texts in the New Testament (which should find us cheering in a manner similar to that of "Super Bowl" enthusiasts) is preached matter of factly and has no movement or excitement of any kind.

Let me tell you what I mean. I preached my first, official Easter sermon six years after I began Seminary. I was chomping at the bit to do so. I had to wait until I was the pastor of my own congregation. I have one vivid memory of an Easter sermon during my years at Seminary, preached by a friend of mine. He spoke about the three women on Easter morning, going out to do a task that was routine for women in those days (the key word here is routine). I was determined to dispute his notions, the very first chance I had. I waited four years. I took issue with the idea that anointing the body of a best

friend is ever a routine task, never mind a messiah. These women are never given a chance to grieve, to really wail. Neither are they given an opportunity to let loose their joy or show any understanding of what has happened. If women have something to shout about or dance about, they go ahead and do it when they are together. Sometimes they are brave enough to do their shouting and celebrating in front of others. (All one has to do is tune in "The Price Is Right" for five minutes to grasp a picture of women and men getting excited in public). Mary Magdalene was a brave woman, a strong woman, a woman not afraid to grieve or to rejoice.¹

Now, about grieving; I have been a registered professional nurse for almost 17 years now. Eleven of those years have been spent working in Intensive Care Units of one kind or another. Please, believe me when I say, the task of preparing a dead body is never routine even if it belongs to someone you have known for just a few hours. I have prepared the dead body of a close friend only once in my life; a task that Mary Magdalene and the other women may have had to perform a number of times during their lives. One's emotional attachment to the one

¹ Swidler, 85. Refers to the tradition of women dancing in the Hebrew tradition. The prophetess Miriam danced as part of her profession.

who has died does not disappear just because one's hands are at work. There is a possessiveness about the work and a slow seemingly methodical pattern of cleansing the mortal wound, binding the hands and feet, wrapping cloth from the crown of the head in a circular pattern down around the chin to hold the jaw in place, and finally the body is wrapped in a shroud. As if it were a ritual, the face is covered last as the final step in the process.

My description of the task of wrapping the dead may be considered morbid, but the morning mission and the anticipated work of the women disciples of Jesus must not be discounted by anyone simply because their perfumed oils and clean shroud were not used or even needed that day to wrap the body of the one who had died. Only when we can imagine what they expected to do can we grasp the full extent of their shock and surprise, or stunned silence. The women disciples, Mary Magdalene in particular, are the first eyewitnesses to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It has been pointed out by scholars and by Luke and Paul that such is the criterion for being named an apostle. Mary received her commission that morning and proclaimed the first Easter sermon. ²

Finally, the resurrection has so confounded us by its mystery that we often fail to let loose its power from

²Ibid., 222.

the pulpit on Easter Sunday morning. The miraculous events and appearances of the Christ, which are generally the passages of scripture prescribed for Eastertide, have a tendency to make us very nervous as well. But it is the effect that this particular event had on the disciples that becomes our occasion for learning how we might have responded. It is in the faces of these biblical men and women and in their reactions that we can begin to see how we might have felt had we been there. The same doubts, the same fears and frustrations, the same elation and confusion should be part of our common memory, challenging us to renew every moment our faith in a God who is eternally full of surprises. ³

³ Aimee Semple McPherson, "He Is Risen" Sermon preached at an Easter Morning Services. No date for this sermon could be found when I called Angelus Temple for a copyright. I own the tape of this sermon and confess that it was Aimee Semple McPherson who I first heard say that a woman preached the first Easter sermon. I wrote a paper on her preaching for a church history class and — studying her sermons (both audio and written) — found that she was a "master" at the utilization of the verbal hook. The hook is a single phrase that is repeated throughout the sermon and also conveniently sticks in the minds of the listeners when they go home, so they literally take something away from the service with them. The hook for Semple-McPherson was often the title of the sermon for, example, her sermon entitled "Ain't Ya Comin' Out?" The question is the hook which is almost chanted throughout the sermon. It is the repetition of the hook that keeps the rhythm of the sermon going and its excitement building toward those crowded altar calls for which the evangelist was so famous.

The Scriptural Narratives

Matthew 28:1-10

Now after the sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulchre. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Some, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. Lo I have told you." So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold Jesus met them and said, "Hail!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

Mark 16:1-8

And when the sabbath was past Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back--it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed. And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you." And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.

Luke 24:1-11

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel; and as they were

frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified and on the third day rise." And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told this to the apostles; but these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them.

John 20:1-18

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran, and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus Loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Peter then came out with the other disciple, and they went toward the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first; and stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; he saw the linen cloths lying and the napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths, but rolled up in a place by itself. The other disciple who reached the tomb first, also went in, and saw and believed. For as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Saying this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord;" and she told them that he had said these things to her.

RSV

"I Have Seen The Lord. Christ Is Risen" *

On this day many more than a thousand years ago, a woman by the name of Mary Magdalene--an assertive, independent woman--a disciple of the man known as Jesus of Nazareth -- set out, very early in the morning to prepare her crucified friend for burial. She was afraid...no...she was terrified, a stranger in a strange city, but she was determined not to show it. Beaten and exhausted by her grief, she was aware that the task that lay ahead was perhaps more than even she could handle. The men refused to help her, saying it was "women's work." "Let them try it and see how they feel," she thought to herself as she marched out to cleanse and anoint the body of one she loved beyond measure--a brother, a lover, a friend, beaten and bruised beyond recognition, cut and bleeding, shamed publicly in front of his mother and friends. A sharp pain gnawed at her stomach. Her heart kept skipping beats and fluttered in her chest as her anxiety mounted; yet her face remained calm, resolute, and composed as she lead her companions in the direction of the tomb. Mary busied her mind, reviewing the elements she had brought with her to prepare Jesus body for burial. Joseph Of Arimethea..."What a kindly old man he was"... She

* This title is a change from the original. I have renamed the sermon with the hook I use near the end of it. This is Aimee Semple McPherson's influence.

interrupted her thoughts with a picture of his face....He had bought the new linen shroud which was already around Jesus body. But Mary brought another clean shroud, one on which there would be no blood stains. She brought strips of soft cloth to bind his hands and feet together and to wrap under his jaw. She brought the sweet perfumes and cleansing oils which she had prepared the evening before. She alone would soothe them over his skin. As she walked, she looked for the various landmarks that she had tried to identify in the waning light of Friday afternoon. She was unfamiliar with the area and it was located some distance from the the place where she and the other disciples were hiding-out. Mary was sure she could identify it once they got close to it. The tomb was brand new and hewn out of a huge rock formation. She had helped Joseph and his servants push a giant boulder across the entrance of the tomb so that no one else would use it for their dead or disturb the precious one who slept there.

It was nearly forty hours since they had placed Jesus there and the task at hand would be difficult. She had not wanted to wait so long, but the Sabbath was no time to be milling about tombs. The risk of being identified was too great and touching the dead on the Sabbath was still strictly forbidden. So today she and the others would take care of Jesus together. Today they would be able to sit by him and mourn for him and for themselves.

Mary had lain awake all night Friday thinking about

what she might have done to save Jesus. She fantasized about how she might have managed his escape. She could have bribed the soldiers to let him escape. They might have taken the money, abused her and still not let him go. Mary was still mumbling and talking to herself through her tears of frustration and anger, when she arrived at the spot where her landmarks told her the tomb should be, but there was no boulder blocking the entrance of the tomb. She was positive it was the very same tomb where they had put his body, but it couldn't be. Her mind raced: "This has to be the right one. Yes, I know it is. I remember that flowering bush over there and that ledge running along the rock face. But the boulder was there. I didn't imagine it."

The others watched as Mary looked around muttering to herself. They wondered why she hesitated to go into the tomb. "This is the place. I'm certain of it." A sudden blast of motherly protective instinct swept over her. "If anyone has disturbed him or hurt him,...I'll....I'll...." and she bolted through the gaping entrance to the tomb. As she groped around in the darkness she snapped orders at Salome: "Oh will you hurry up and light the lamp, Salome!?"

As the lamplight spread throughout the cavernous darkness Mary could see that her groping hands had found the place where Jesus body had lain. She looked toward the ground automatically, as if she had dropped something.

She saw the bloodstained linen shroud under her knees. She began to choke as her anger and her fear took over any shred of rationality she had left. "Someone has stolen his body!" They have taken it and are going to burn it as one more warning for us to heed." Mary ran outside gasping for breath. Her chest hurt as she tried to breathe deeper. Her mind stumbled over itself as she tried to clear her head and think through what to do next. "Where could they have taken him? I don't even know where to start looking." Mary at last gave into her tears and sat down sobbing beside the entrance to the tomb. Even as she wept she leaned over one more time to look into the cave. Maybe she had missed something. As she looked at the spot where she had left her beloved savior...there appeared what she thought looked like two angels in dazzling robes. She wiped her eyes thinking that what she saw might be the light from the lamp that still burned inside the tomb, reflecting against her watery eyes. But the angels spoke to her and asked her why she was weeping. Like a worn out frustrated little child who has lost her mother, Mary said: "I am crying because my Lord has been taken away and I do not know where they have put him." She wasn't sure what made her turn her eyes from the tomb and look in the opposite direction. Perhaps, out of the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of the man rustling about in the bushes nearby.

When their eyes met, he too asked why she was

crying, and as if he thought she was lost, he asked who she was looking for. Instantly forgetting about the angels she might have or might not have seen, her more rational thoughts returned. She leapt to her feet to address the one she assumed to be the tombs' caretaker. Much relieved by her revelation, she thought to herself, "Why, of course, they moved the body to another place to keep him safe from vandals or soldiers..or whatever." As she approached him she spoke: "Sir, if you are the one who carried him off, to another place, tell me where you have lain him and I will take him away and bury him." When the caretaker spoke again he called Mary by name in a voice all too familiar to her: "Mary."

In a sudden flood of emotion as if all the pain and anguish of the last two days had been held captive within her and suddenly set free, Mary let out a groan and whispered "Rabboni" as she threw herself at the feet of the one who had called her name.

The other women were beside themselves by this time, not knowing whether to go to Mary and pull her away from that poor man or to just leave her until she herself was ready to go.

It seemed as if the caretaker had decided to handle the situation. He cradled Mary gently in his arms until her trembling subsided and her sobs turned into softly falling tears. His words fell gently upon her ears as he said: "Cling no longer to me, but go and tell my

brothers and sisters what you alone have seen." "Tell them, Mary, that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God." Somewhat dazed, Mary stood up and began to descend the path and as if suddenly awakened she thought to ask: "Will I see you again?" But when she turned to look back he was gone. She noticed the other women waiting by the entrance to the tomb, but made no connection with them. She turned back to the path and ruminated as she walked. How could she be sure that what she thought she saw, she really did see? Was it possible? "Is he alive?" she whispered to herself. Just the hint of a smile began to form at the edges of her mouth. Her steps seemed lighter as she walked and talked to herself. "Well, why not?" she reasoned. "Hadn't he done the same thing for Lazarus and Jairus' daughter, and that widow's son?" "Why not himself?"

Mary started composing a speech on the long walk back to their lodgings. She wasn't exactly sure what to say. How would she explain what it was she had seen and heard? Mary quickened her pace as she approached the house where the others awaited her return. Finally unable to contain her excitement one moment longer she took the last hundred yards at a dead run. She came crashing through the door and before anyone could offer a critique of her rather un-ladylike entrance, she panted: "I have seen the Lord, Christ is risen!" She said it again, shouting it at the top of her voice: "I have seen the Lord, Christ is risen!" She

began to dance around the room taking the hands of the dumbstruck disciples and whirling about with them, laughing triumphantly and gleefully, she chanted: "I have seen. I have seen. I have seen. I have seen".... she danced on until all of the disciples were on their feet and began to form a circle around her frenzied two step! Suddenly, she stopped and stood stock still in the midst of them. Her eyes were red and puffy, even her face was swollen from all the tears she had shed. She looked into each pair of eyes staring back at her from the circle. She compelled each one to look at her with the sheer determination of her gaze and each one listened as she made her proclamation as many times as there were faces: "I have seen the Lord, Christ is risen!" "I have seen the Lord, Christ is risen!" "I have seen the Lord, Christ is risen!" "I have seen the Lord, Christ is risen!"

When she had finished with them, she dropped the arm that pointed at each disciple in turn, and walked over to her corner of the room where she collapsed. She slept to dream and recover the hours she had lost during what seemed to be days of endless tears. The words of her chant lulled her to sleep, like some redeeming lullaby that only a mother might sing.

AMEN

More Midrash On The Resurrection Narratives

In the introduction to this chapter, I said that the resurrection narratives prescribed for Easter and Eastertide are often left to stand on their own as stories. The attitude is that they do not need further interpretation. I disagree for the sake of "doubting Thomas" who has become a negative household cliché. Thomas has been done a grave injustice by being locked up in a personality that we mock and blame and never offer the opportunity for growth.

All of our humans doubts about life and particularly the resurrection are reflected in the face of the disciple known as Thomas. He speaks for all of us, but he is the only one willing to make a fool of himself, in public, asking the questions that are on everyone's mind. We have ignored his pain and discounted his honesty. Who is he really? How does Thomas evolve as a disciple of the Christ? He has a number of dialogue lines in scripture that tell us a little about him. His reactions to situations are, after awhile, predictable.

The following midrash is a personality profile on Thomas. This interpretive story seeks to rescue Thomas from the shadows of his own disbelief and tell of the dramatic conversion of Thomas which the scripture says took place on the morning that Thomas saw or touched (the

scripture does not specify what took place, only that the whole encounter changed the life of the disciple known as Thomas) the wounds of the resurrected Christ. Not discussed in John's Gospel is the legend that Thomas became a missionary evangelizing as far away as India.⁵ He is included in John's enumeration of the disciples who breakfasted on the beach with the resurrected Christ in chapter 21. How soon after the resurrection event, that breakfast took place is not clearly delineated in the scriptures. It must have been time enough for the fishermen to return to their nets and business as usual.

I took the liberty of giving Thomas something to do in the interim between Christ's second and third appearances for the purpose of dramatizing Thomas' response to the resurrection. It is possible for him to have done what I have suggested and still make it to breakfast by the Sea of Galilee (Tiberias).

I have utilized some of the other scriptural references to Thomas and bits of dialogue assigned to him to indicate the broader space of time over which Thomas spiritual growth must have occurred. The midrash accepts as truth the legends about Thomas' missionary work. My intention is to give the reader/hearer new insight into

⁵ E.P. Blair, "Thomas," The Interpreter's Dictionary Of The Bible, eds. George Buttrick et al., vol. 4, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 631-632.

the person of this loyal disciple. We have never allowed him to change after that morning with the Christ, but we must, in order that we may be changed right along with him.

Thomas' story is told in the first person singular by one of the other disciples who remains unnamed. This is a someone who judged and teased Thomas right along with the others, but who observes him and sees him more and more clearly with sympathetic eyes. Not only is Thomas' conversion central to the story, but a change in the outlook and attitude of the other disciples is noticeable as seen through the eyes of the one. There is no guessing who the disciple is, because he/she has no particular identity. This one seer could be anyone of the disciples or all of them.

John 20:19-29

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any they are retained."

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails and place my hand in his side I will not believe.

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless but believing." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

RSV

"In Praise Of Doubting, I'm From Missouri, Thomas"

They called him "the twin" although whose twin, no one really knew for sure. Some said he looked a little bit like Jesus, except he had hard stubborn eyes that always seemed to be fixed in a kind of scowl. There were others who said he had a long lost twin brother or sister somewhere and that's how he got the name, Thomas. Thomas joined Jesus' ministry as one of the first half-dozen or so disciples. He seemed a nice enough sort-- a bit too inquisitive perhaps, and always at the wrong time-- but nice. To put it another way, the guy had no tact and very poor timing. It was as though he was just too blockheaded to understand what Jesus was trying to say to us, but Jesus refused to encourage his departure. I guess he thought Thomas had potential. Heaven knows where Jesus got that notion. It seemed to me that when the wheels of Thomas' mind were in motion they were always turning backwards. He saw the negative side of everything. If one of us had a novel idea, he'd say that it couldn't be done, even before hearing it fully. He was loyal though, I'll say that much for him.

I remember the night Jesus was talking with a lone Pharisee whom he had met on the road, a days distance from Bethany. I forget the name of the place. Anyway, Jesus topped the evening off with one of his, hard to swallow, stories--the one about the "good Samaritan." What made it

hard to swallow was the simple fact that we had just come through a Samaritan village where they had refused to let any of us stay the night. * They hate Judeans and when they found out that we were Judeans, headed for Jerusalem, they made it very clear we were not welcome within their borders. We were probably lucky to escape with our lives. To be honest I wasn't looking forward to sleeping under the same roof with those "people" anyway.

So, Jesus, was telling this Pharisee a story about Samaritans to explain what he meant by the commandment, "Love God and Love your neighbor." He caught us all off guard when he announced that the "good guy" in the story was a Samaritan. We all squirmed a bit remembering how they had treated us just a couple of days before. I felt a little twinge of guilt, which prevented me from protesting. And the poor Pharisee was dumbstruck. None of us had anything to say in response that is no one except Thomas. He crashed into our silence with: "Oh come on Jesus, A Samaritan, rescue a Judean? Really, now!" A Samaritan wouldn't rescue his own grandmother if she was drowning in the Sea Of Galilee." I have to admit, that most of us agreed with Thomas, but wouldn't have been dumb enough to say it. Jesus answered Thomas with surprising patience, I thought, and chuckling said: "Thomas try to be

* Luke 9:52-55, RSV.

more optimistic about your fellow man. There is hope for everybody on God's earth."

It was soon after that, that we began calling Thomas, Thomas the Optomas, slurring the word optimist to rhyme with his name. From that day forward no one could ever resist an opportunity to tell Thomas the latest Samaritan joke. "Hey Thomas the Optomas, how many Samaritans does it take to light an oil lamp?" He would usually laugh, but I began to see that he knew he was the brunt of the jokes. He refused to change his attitude, however, and was teased unmercifully because of it. He even began to introduce himself as "Thomas the Optomas" before anyone else had the chance. His introduction was usually accompanied by a chorus of 22 rolling eyes, ours. I guess it was his way of participating in the joke rather than being the joke. His acceptance of the nickname helped all of us better accept him for who he was, although we were no less annoyed by his tactless interruptions and his obvious prejudices.

I think it was the night of the long meal that I got my first glimpse of the frightened, vulnerable side of Thomas. It was the side he kept locked up behind tactless, bigoted remarks and a rough exterior. At the seder supper on the night of the feast of the Paschal lamb, Jesus spoke to us as if he were saying goodbye. His language was poetic, and quite frankly, went over my head much of the

time. He talked about Peter forgetting him, disowning him someday and rambled on about going someplace where we could not go. He said he was going to prepare a place for us there....there in his "Father's" house. He announced that he would be back to get us, and then said the strangest thing: "You know the way where I am going."

Poor Thomas was so frustrated (and perhaps a little worse for his wine) that he blurted out: "But Lord, we don't know where you are going." "How can we possibly get there?" Jesus answer seemed so vague that even Thomas was left speechless. Jesus said, "I am the way" and something about the truth and the life and then he began to speak to God. He spoke aloud, but he was no longer speaking to us.

Later that night, Roman soldiers and officers of the chief priests and the Pharisees came and marched Jesus away like some kind of criminal. While most of us ran for our own lives, Peter followed after Jesus. Peter returned sometime after daybreak the next morning obviously shaken and distraught. He told us then that Jesus was to be crucified.

Friday was the longest day of my life. While some of the women disciples walked beside Jesus to the hill where they killed him, we stayed behind in the upper room. We could only wait for the terrible news, afraid that if we were anywhere near the scene of his crucifixion,

we too might be crucified right along with him. I felt ashamed of my terror. I should have been willing to die with him. Thomas was not afraid. He had been ready to go with Jesus, but we restrained him. Jesus words kept repeating in my heead over and over again, "Where I am going you cannot follow." We did not leave the room all that day or the next, keeping a silent watch over one another as, huddled together, we mourned our loss.

We were lost, paralyzed by the sudden end of what was for some of us a three year journey. But when Mary came crashing through the door on Sunday morning to tell us-- and I know this sounds incredible-- that Jesus had somehow risen from the dead, our silence was broken.

Thinking that she was hysterical and exhausted over the ordeal of preparing him for burial, we tried to comfort her and soothe what we thought were jangled nerves, but she was insistent. We listened to her tale and when she finally fell asleep we began to plan our escape from Jerusalem.

That evening, however, Jesus apeared to all of us. He walked right into the midst of us and greeted us with a benediction: "Peace be with you." He showed us his hands and his side where the nails had been, just in case we doubted that what we were seeing was real. Then he did the strangest thing, he blew his breath on us. He explained that this was the "Holy Spirit" he promised on the night of the Paschal feast. This Holy Spirit, he said was now "upon" us an we were called from this moment onward, to

forgive the sins of humanity. He said that if we held humanity bound, they would be bound. We were inspired, reeling as if drunk with the delightfulness of God's grace. And wouldn't you know it, "Thomas the Optomas" wasn't there to see it.

As luck would have it though, I was chosen to break the news to him. How on earth was I going to tell him what had transpired during his absence? No matter how I prepared him, there was a good possibility he wouldn't believe me. So I decided on the direct approach. "Thomas do you remember Mary saying something about Jesus being raised from the dead this morning?" Well, I know we all thought she was exhausted and hysterical, but Thomas, while you were out, Jesus appeared to all of us; he just appeared to us out of the middle of no where." I know it sounds crazy, but he showed us his wounds and then he breathed his spirit upon us and instructed us that from here on out we were to forgive people and that they would be forgiven indeed."

Thomas was outraged. He just knew he was being made the brunt of another very sick joke. "I heard how you all discounted Mary's tale this morning; you thought that she was raving. "You are cruel and insensitive, all of you." "Don't you think that I have feelings?" "My heart is breaking and you mock me still." Do you think for one moment that you are the only ones who miss him?"

Thomas could not see that I was being sincere. He could not look into my eyes which were now filled with pity. "Go away and leave me alone", he growled. "I may be tactless and negative in my thinking and maybe you all think I am stupid, but I knew Jesus would never sit on Herod's throne or overthrow the Roman Emperor. I have been a realist while the rest of you lived in your glorious pipedreams. Now you are inventing stories about his being alive not dead. Are you trying to keep your dreams alive? I am through. I wash my hands of all of you. And remember this, the fact that I knew he would fail does not mean, I didn't love him. I'll be leaving at the end of the week and I don't care after that what happens to any of you."

Try as we might to convince Thomas of the truth of what we saw, he would have no part of it or us. Once in total exasperation, he said, "I will never believe it without probing the nail marks in his hands or touching the wound on his side! And Christ, himself, is the only one who can show me that! Now will you leave me alone!"

Thomas planned to leave on Thursday of that week wanting to find another place to spend the sabbath, but he was delayed. When Friday rolled around he had, reluctantly decided to spend the sabbath with us and leave at daybreak on Sunday. We spent a tense few days together, but when the sun rose on Sunday morning and Thomas prepared to leave, all of us were up to see him off. As we tried our

best to wish him well, suddenly the slits of sunlight which had pryed their way through the shutters were blocked by a shadowy figure. Then came the familiar greeting: "Peace be with you." Thomas spun around to face himself in the image of The Christ. Speechless he reached out to Jesus. Jesus took his hand and instructed him: Take your finger and examine my hand." "Put your hand into my side." Thomas dropped his eyes as Jesus first traced Thomas' finger around the marks in his hands. As Jesus brought his hand closer to his side, Thomas fell to his knees at Jesus feet and began to sob. Jesus bent down and took him gently by the shoulders. Thomas lifted his gaze to look into Jesus eyes and Jesus said softly: "Do not persist in your unbelief, Thomas, but believe!" Thomas shook his head as if Jesus words had fallen like stinging pebbles on his ears. He embraced The Christ, his arms trembling, and through his sobs he cried out: "My Lord and my God." Jesus continued speaking to him, "You became a believer because you saw me; blessed are those, Thomas, who have not seen and have believed." With that he was gone.

All that day, Thomas spent time apologizing to the rest of us for not believing that we were sincere in telling him the story of Jesus's first visit. He realized now that we had wanted only to comfort him, not mock him as he supposed. Thomas made a lot of promises that day, pledging with a chuckle to live up to his nickname and not be so quick to judge people and circumstances

negatively. He resolved not to be so very pessimistic, which he decided he had confused with realistic. It's hard to change old habits and a negative attitude is as much a bad habit as biting your fingernails, but Thomas was determined to break it. He vowed to spread the news of Christ's resurrection as a trusting, believing, disciple of The Christ and full-fledged brother of humanity. The resurrection of The Christ, he now understood, was our link to God; it was "the way", Jesus spoke of, that connects us with God. He would offer this crucified and resurrected Christ to humanity as proof of the truth of God's grace and as the life for every soul who is searching for a reason to be alive.

He left us the next morning, proclaiming as he went: "Believe, for I have seen! I have seen, so that you may believe the truth of what I tell you; that Jesus is The Christ, the son of the living God. He was crucified, yet now he lives! Believe for I have seen."

Thomas headed north in the direction of Samaria, perhaps to share his news with Samaritans who had born the brunt of his prejudice (I wished him luck). It is said that Thomas, the disciple became a blessing to all sorts of people, accomplishing much in the name of the Christ. Thomas challenged even the doubters to believe the wonderful news he felt compelled to share as he told his own story of doubt and repeated Jesus's last words to him, "Blessed are those who have believed, yet have not seen."

Some of our number met Thomas once again for breakfast by the Sea Of Galilee. Jesus came once again time to confront Peter about his return to fishing for fish instead of folks. But that's another story.

AMEN

Still More Midrash On The Resurrection Narratives

The road to Emmaus story is another narrative which is allowed to stand on its own merit. It is a wonderful miraculous story about the appearance of the Christ, but little is said about the two who kept company with the Christ for an entire day and didn't recognize him. That's always one of the details that has bothered me about these narratives. Why don't they recognize him? Such a question is to be categorized with "virgin birth" questions as unanswerable.

I had other questions about the story which were researchable and needed to be answered. Why, for instance, were these two individuals on the road to Emmaus in the first place? I asked an Episcopalian priest friend of mine why he thought these two were going that way and he said, "They were going home." "How do you know that?" I asked. That is a presupposition about the text. Suppose Emmaus was not home for the two on the road, what is there for them? "Why," I asked myself, "were they leaving Jerusalem immediately after hearing Mary's news about Jesus' resurrection?" Are they afraid? Emmaus is a town mentioned just this once, by Luke. What special significance might a walk to the town of Emmaus have for the two travellers?

My research on the town of Emmaus arrived at a

dead end. The historians did not seem to know exactly where it was or when it disappeared from existence.⁷ "If", I asked, "it no longer exists, what on earth happened to it?" The seeds of a midrash had been planted in my imagination, but this midrash promised to have the flavor of fantasy. I wanted to develop the characters of the two travellers/ disciples on the who could not recognize their Christ. My intention was, once again, to portray these people as real multi-dimensional humans with feelings and fears; persons who like ourselves have moments in their lives when all they want to do is run away.

In this "fantastic" midrashic tale about a town called Emmaus the chronological margins of the text have been expanded to give a brief history of the evolution and metamorphosis of the town. Luke's biblical account is inserted into the story and is embellished with costumes and set pieces that might have been borrowed from the wardrobe department of "Star Wars."

The story's climax takes place at the Communion table in the moment the travellers recognize the Christ. The occasion is loud and happy, not subdued. It is an occasion of redemption, forgiveness and change. The very incident stimulates a response; it does not simply call for one. We are compelled to respond to the

⁷ K.W. Clark, "Emmaus," The Interpreter's Dictionary of The Bible, vol.2, 97-98.

resurrection of . . . The Christ, not just acknowledge it.

This story tells what the resurrected Christ did to an entire town and includes the reader/hearer of the story as part of Christ's work still to be done.

This midrash is actually my very first. It is the story which launched this project. Its original title was actually the first question I asked of the text: "What's in Emmaus?" Now it is simply titled, "Emmaus".

Luke 24:13-33a

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened here in these days?" And he said to them, "What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since this happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb, and found it just as the women had said; but Jesus they did not see." And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and be glorified?" And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning Jesus the Christ.

So they drew near to the village to which they were going. Jesus appeared to be going further, but they urged against it, saying "Stay with us for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So Jesus went to stay with them. While at table with them, Jesus took the bread and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus, who then vanished out of their sight. They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while Jesus talked to us on the road, and opened to us the scriptures?" And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem.

RSV Inclusive Language

"Emmaus"

As far back as anyone could remember the world had seemed a reasonably happy place to live. Of course, everyone had good days, even great days, as well as bad days and even awful days. Most people understood that such was life and if one person had a bad day and another had a good day, they kept an appropriate distance so as not to disturb a sort of fatalistic balance. In the hustle and bustle of everyday life there were traumas to endure as well as joys to celebrate. Oxcart traffic took its toll over the holidays, drought ruined crops, floods devastated property, travellers got lost in the desert wilderness, and not a few people were mugged and robbed by thieves. These traumas, however did not outweigh the occasions for celebrating life and good fortune. There were weddings, and holidays, building dedications, birthday parties, coming of age celebrations and more. The reasons for having a party were always more abundant than the occasions for mourning and whenever there was something to celebrate, entire communities turned out to participate.

This is the story of one such community, an ordinary town located about seven and half miles west of

Jerusalem as the swift flies.⁸ The name of the town is Emmaus, meaning the town of warm wells.⁹ Emmaus has a stormy and mysterious history. It seems that the town underwent a most disconcerting metamorphosis over a relatively short period of time. There are no satisfactory explanations as to what exactly happened, but the change seems to have begun gradually and spread rapidly, when one or two people began blaming their bad days on the weather or the traffic and, then, on other people. Folks just began attacking everybody else about their bad days, so that all of the folks having a good day were blamed for the bad days of others. Then when folks who had good days ruined by folks having bad days, had bad days they blamed their bad day on those folks who, until that moment in time, were having relatively good days. Each instance of blaming and accusing felt like a slap in the face, and the people of Emmaus gradually began walking with their heads and their eyes lowered in order to avoid recognition and possible abuse from a verbal attacker. Soon folks began to move about with their heads and eyes lowered which gave them the appearance of being

⁸ W. S. McCullough, "Bird," The Interpreter's Dictionary Of The Bible, vol. 1, 439-440.

⁹ Clark, "Emmaus," Interpreter's Dictionary Of The Bible, vol. 2, 97.

stooped over. When they spoke it was in muffled tones and only toward the ground. It became their custom to speak only out of necessity. After an even longer time, no one knew who was having good days or bad days, because no one knew anyone anymore. There were no community celebrations, no parades, no building dedications, no birthday parties, nothing, because folks were unable anymore to face one another. The fear of looking into blaming or hurt eyes was too great. The people of Emmaus solved their dilemmas by avoiding each other. Their avoidance grew into an elaborate, systematic lifestyle. House by house they began to board up the windows of their homes so that no one could see inside them. House by house, as if by pure instinct, they took down all their mirrors to avoid seeing the hurt and fear and blaming in their own eyes. They fashioned special gourds for drinking water, from the many shallow pools that dotted the towns landscape. The long end of the gourd formed a natural handle. The hollowed out end of the gourd could be dipped into the water without the person having to lean over the pool and glimpse him or herself reflected in the crystal clear water of the pools. This seemingly complex movement also kept the Emmauns from catching a glimpse of one another in the public fountain. It was because of these gourds which the Emmauns wore tied to the belts of

long, hooded, robes that they came to be called the "Gourd people".

The long robes had quickly become the rage, since the hem of the garment rested on the instep, and the hood drooped several inches over the lower head, keeping one's face completely shadowed. The task of remaining anonymous took all of their energy and imagination. The robes covered any telltale scars or marks on familiar feet, legs, ankles, or hands. The robes became a uniform and eventually, the city's dress code. I use the word city, because Emmaus quickly became a haven for people who wanted to be anonymous. The town actually thrived and grew, precisely because people could get lost there. Emmaus was a perfectly miserable place to live, but all of the people who moved there were looking for just that, a perfectly miserable place, where no one knew your business or cared. No one asked how you were or who you were because in Emmaus the folks believed that no one deserved to know anything about anyone else.

The people who came to settle in Emmaus were not all criminals, as you might suspect. They were guilty folks, looking for refuge in a place that had evolved in a kind of secret hidden sanctuary. Emmaus was a place to wallow in one's guilt and at the same time hide from those one had hurt. Emmaus was a place to carry one's shame

alone and hide from those who would remind one of the reason or cause of that shame. In Emmaus the ashamed people made up the core of the population.

New no-window homes sprang up all over as the city sprawled westward. No one ever seemed to move away. The town leaders began to set regulations for entry into the town hoping to discourage those who made up the growing criminal element of the population and whose had not thought through their decision to move in yet and were not fully prepared to make the changes necessary to live there.

Entrants had to arrive at the city gates, walking as the Emmauns walked, stooped over. The regulations stated that they had to be covered from head to foot in long belted robes with their gourds tied appropriately on one side or the other. No reflective materials were allowed beyond the gates and all talking was to be done to the ground. If any of the above regulations were not followed to the letter, the newcomers were sent away until such time as they were appropriately dressed or practiced in the walk. There were always gourd and robe venders just outside the gate if someone was particularly determined to enter that very day. And once they were inside the gates folks rarely changed their minds and decided to leave again. There was one occasion

however which was the most memorable entrance and exit in the city's history.

Three newcomers entered the gates on a Sunday evening. They managed to stay for supper and two of them left immediately thereafter. It's better if folks know right away that they aren't going to fit in. One has to be committed to the way of life in Emmaus to benefit from its uniqueness.

Apparently the two who left had good reason to stay. They had gotten involved with that prophet who caused such a stir up in Jerusalem over the holidays and got himself arrested and executed. Anyway these two were really close to him, until he got arrested for blasphemy and conspiracy. The Romans made an example of him and executed him right away. It seems (now I know it sounds absurd) that after the prophet was dead and buried, he came back to life. And just after hearing the news, his two friends were on the road out of town. They ran away when he was taken prisoner and were helpless to save him. They feared for their own lives as well. But when they heard the news that he was risen from the dead, they decided not to stay around to find out if he was angry. They felt bad enough. They were ashamed of having deserted him and were guilt-ridden over his death. Those are just the kind of feelings that bring folks flocking

to Emmaus. The two followers of the prophet knew about Emmaus; everyone did. Plenty of people had been turned away at the gates of the city, and disgruntled people talk a lot. The city was only a few hours walk from Jerusalem, and it promised sanctuary, escape and anonymity. They knew that if they stayed in Jerusalem, it would only be a matter of time before they bumped into their deserted friend, risen from the dead. If they fled to Emmaus they would never have to face him or themselves with the truth and the wrenching pain of their guilt. In Emmaus no one would ever know about their crimes, or even care.

In Jerusalem they could easily be identified as Galileans, by their accents. Someone had already cornered one of their companions, Peter, and asked him if he knew "the prophet Jesus who was being executed for conspiracy." Someone heard him speak and knew instantly that he was from the same part of the country as Jesus. These two disciples never wanted to be confronted with such questions. They were afraid mostly that someone might see their guilt-ravaged eyes and know their sin. They were certain that they deserved their pain and their misery. They were convinced that they simply deserved to wallow in their shame with all of the other guilty people carrying the weight of it all in the center of their

backs, stooped over in the city of anonymity.

As they set out to walk the seven miles that lay between peril and safety; they were joined by another traveller. He appeared in the instant they passed through Jerusalem's west gate. They could not see his face, because they were robed and walking stooped over, determined to practice their walk during the seven mile trek to Emmaus. The other traveller walked upright, that much they knew, for his stride was brisk and hearty. He had greeted them cheerfully, but they avoided the automatic temptation to look up. They nodded, instead and continued mumbling to one another reviewing their reasons for running away.

After awhile, their companion interrupted them saying: "I overheard you talking just now and am curious what you are discussing. Won't you, please include me in your conversation?" A bit astonished by the insistent tone of the stranger, they spoke louder and were surprised that he seemed to know nothing about the execution of Jesus of Nazareth. Finally, exasperated by his continual questions, they said, in unison, "You must be the only one in the city who doesn't know what happened over the holidays?!" He persisted in his questioning and concluding that he must have been drunk or passed out somewhere from too much celebrating they decided it would

be relatively safe to fill the stranger in on the events of the last couple of days. They had not planned it, but it was like a flood gate had opened up. Here was someone who had no apparent knowledge of the scandal and who became a sort of neutral set of ears listening to their side of the story. He could not possibly judge them or the events that had occurred, because he had no part in any of it. As they told their incredible story their pace quickened, ever so slightly, and their backs straightened almost imperceptibly.

Their travelling companion, although uninformed, was surprisingly well read, oddly enough in the holy scriptures. He took over the conversation, weaving the prophetic words of the scriptures very matter of factly in and out of the story they had just told. He said that the prophets had foretold of such events; that the "one whom God would send, would suffer before entering into God's glory." (Luke 24:26, Isaiah 53)

The time on the road passed quickly as they listened to the stranger. He seemed intent on convincing the others of the truth in what he was saying. And although they were loathe to admit it, his words, stirred some feelings of relief in their guilt-riddled souls. There was just a hint of restored self-image in their steps, and in their ever-so-slightly more animated voices.

But they remembered, all too soon, the reason for their journey. Scriptures fulfilled or not, they had no excuse for their behavior in Jerusalem. They had fallen asleep in the garden when they were supposed to be keeping watch, and then when Jesus was seized by the church officials and their soldiers they ran for their lives. For three days after that they trembled in fear, flinching at every creak in the floorboards; holding their breath everytime they heard footsteps that sounded heavier than the sandals on civilian feet. And this very morning Mary had come crashing through the door of the house shouting, "He is risen! He has risen from the dead!" When she said that the nerves of the two runaways were so jangled they nearly succumbed. When the news sunk in, the two knew it was only a matter of time before they faced the one they had betrayed. Their frazzled and broken souls could not endure such a confrontation so they fled to the city of anonymity.

The three sojourners reached the gates of Emmaus about sunset. The two who were to be the newest residents of the city realized that their companion intended to go on since he had made no effort to stoop over and had neither a regulation robe or a gourd. On a whim they two whose journey had ended in Emmaus, asked the third to stay the night. They urged him not to go on pointing out that

it would be dark soon and the road was dangerous to travel alone at night.

With very little coaxing he stooped over, bought a robe and a gourd from the 24 hour discount vender by the gate and shuffled on through with his two companions.

There were several hotels in town maintained for the benefit of the newcomers who needed to get established and settled into their new windowless homes. Construction could not keep up with the steady influx of new residents, so the hotels actually served as temporary quarters.

The three stopped at the first hotel they came to, and as they approached the front desk, the smell of warm bread reminded them that they had not eaten all day. Before checking in the requested a table and some food and the road-weary stooped-over forms sat down to a meal of fresh bread, good wine, and sweet herbs. As the two reached for the bread to tear off a sizeable hunk, their guest snatched it from the plate and before the two hungry hosts had a chance to express their displeasure, the third lifted the up the loaf. As if compelled to, the hosts followed the bread with their hungry eyes and heard: "Blessed art thou O Lord, our God, Ruler of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." Their guest then broke the bread and gave to each of his hosts a piece

saying: "Take and eat this bread which is my body broken for you." And as they received it from his hands they looked up from under their hoods and recognized the tender eyes of the Christ. Their hands trembled as they took the bread, but they saw no hate or anger in these eyes. What they saw was love and blessing. And in that moment of redemption he vanished.

Tears of joy welled up in the eyes of the two left holding the warm bread in outstretched hands and they began to chuckle as they lifted their cups of wine to their lips. Their quiet laughter erupted into great gushing guffaws of joyous hilarity as they toasted forgiveness and the Christ who had given it. They looked at one another through smiling eyes and raising an eyebrow the one Cleopas said: "Didn't you have the slightest little suspicion"...and interrupting...his wife Mary said, "You mean when he started talking about the scriptures? I was so longing for his company." "Yes!" said Cleopas, "It was like a fire burning within me." "I felt it too." said Mary gleefully.

The couple grew louder and more animated as they talked and compared notes about their journey to Emmaus with the risen Christ. In their excitement they had forgotten where they were. They were sitting bolt upright at the table, hoods thrown off, pouring the rest

of the wine into their gourds instead of into their cups. They clinked their gourds together as they drank looking straight into one another's eyes.

The manager of the hotel and the residents were non-plused by the disturbance, but were unable to see what was going on. The people of Emmaus had nothing at all to laugh about and the new arrivals needed to be set right on their unprecedented behavior. The manager made his way to the table. He could not see the revelers or their joy remaining stooped over as he did and his muffled speech could not be heard over the din of the disciples celebrating. When Cleopas and Mary had finished their supper, they leapt up from the table, nearly tripping over the muttering manager at the foot of it.

Locked together arm in arm, they marched out of the windowless, mirrorless hotel. They sang aloud in the empty streets and headed for the gates of the city. They cheered open the gates, much to the dismay of the gatekeeper and marched straight away to Jerusalem, to tell Peter and Mary Magdalene and everyone what they had seen. They wanted all of their company to know that there was nothing at all to be afraid of. Jesus was not angry or disappointed, as a matter of fact they had eaten supper with him that very evening and he blessed them. They walked the seven miles trying out their story, giggling as

they imagined the responses of the others to their news. They returned to Jerusalem in record time, where another journey began for them.

The story does not end here. After that night, the population of Emmaus began to dwindle as other people started to leave town. To be truthful, they left in droves, walking up-right and laughing, their heads held high and their eyes shining full of life. It was an exodus of changed people all smiling and embracing, talking with and confiding in one another.

Within a few weeks Emmaus became a ghost town. No one seemed to want to stay there. No one seemed to need to stay there any longer.

The day they closed the gates on the city of anonymity, no one was left to live there. On that day in the town square, one lone figure stood surrounded, by heaps of gourds and robes. His tender eyes sparkled and his lips curled in a wistful smile. He brushed off his hands as if he had just finished a particularly messy job and thought to himself: "Wrenching the guilt from someone's eyes, and smoothing out the facial furrows dug by pain and bitterness, and straightening up backs that are weighed down by shame is a messy job, but someone has to do it." He breathed a sigh of relief, wiped the sweat from his brow and vanished.

AMEN

CHAPTER 6

Midrash On Call And Conversion Narratives

What do we do after Christmas? We have invested much time and energy in the weeks prior to the Christmas event planning for the coming of the Baby Jesus. No sooner does the baby Jesus arrive, than we are given one additional week with the baby. Then suddenly the lectionary scriptures suddenly confront us with Jesus, the grown man. Depending upon the year we fill the several weeks preceding the Lenten season with the story of the Magi and Jesus Baptism and the call of the Disciples, but the common thread in these scriptures is not always evident. They all point the way to God's doing a new thing. The new thing that God is doing is heralded by the eventful trip of the Magi to identify the Christ child. The call of the disciples launches God's new thing campaign in the expanded ministry of Jesus. The conversion of many folks through love and forgiveness, rather than through fear and the threat of punishment, demonstrates how God's new thing works. It works simply in the presence of this Christ with us. The three midrash contained in this one chapter, could be their own chapters, but they are compiled together to emphasize the importance of their relationship to God's new plan of salvation for humanity.

These stories tell us the elements of faith necessary for each of us to make the great confession. We must first know the identity of the Christ as messiah. We must then hear the call of the Christ. What follows is repentance and a changed or converted spirit. We confess our sin and our faith in the Christ.

The three stories chosen for this chapter are radical accounts of changed lives. Their very radical nature has been lost in the unfamiliarity of the characters' costumes, actions and beliefs. It is the responsibility of the writer of midrash to uncover and reveal to the reader/ hearer what these scriptural people saw and heard in a context that is familiar enough to stimulate a response.

The three midrashic forms in this chapter are radically different from one another. The first is the scriptural story retold and embellished. The Magi are given names and personalities and dialogue familiar to today's ear. The second midrash is a modern tale of call as seen through the eyes of a child. And the third midrash is a poetic description of the scriptural account of conversion.

The midrash which identifies the Christ is titled "Starchasers." It resembles, somewhat, a Bing Crosby-Bob Hope road movie. "Starchasers" is a story about the three Magi making their way to Bethlehem and

home again. The story is based on Matthew's account which opens chapter two of his Gospel. The identities of Matthew's Magi are uncertain. They could have been priests, or kings, or astrologers, or magicians. ¹ I chose a neutral name because their station in life is not what I believe to be the most important element of the story. I decided, rather, to examine their individual personalities, giving them ordinary names and indiosyncracies as well. They are changed as a result of their search.

The questioning process which followed the initial research of the term Magi began with this question: "How did they feel when they got back home?" How would I feel after an adventure like theirs?"

Matthew's story is filled with adventure, danger, intrigue and suspense in its twelve verses. The assumption that the stargazers are only three in number has to do with the number of gifts which are also three in number. I could have included four or five or even ten more magi, but I didn't want anyone coming to visit the Christ child empty handed. More than three stargazers would tend to make the story bulky.

¹ S.V. McCasland, "Magi," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, vol. 3, 221-223.

When the adventure got underway, more questions arose, for instance: What happens when anyone prepares to take a long trip? How does one get an appointment with a king? How long will the starchasers be away? How does Herod feel? Why? How might the magi react to Herod? How might Herod reveal his true feelings to the out-of town- visitors? What do they do when they get to Bethlehem? Will there be roadsigns posted that say: See the Baby Jesus This Way!? How can the ordinary human feelings of the the starchasers be revealed in the story without completely sacrificing their dignity?

I concluded that the three characters had to relate to one another in such away that the reader could see how they really felt throughout the journey, but the world within the story could not. There are moments when an obvious influence of the three stooges enters in to the three principle characters. The temptation was too strong to resist.

Matthew 2: 1-12

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the one who has been born ruler of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship the newborn child." And hearing this, Herod the king was troubled, and all Jerusalem as well; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was born. They told Herod, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet:

'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will govern my people Israel.'

Then Herod summoned the magi secretly, and ascertained from them what time the star appeared, and sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently, and when you have found the child bring me word that I too may come and worship him." When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered the child gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

RSV

"Starchasers"

Starstruck and itching to travel, Gerald, Frank and Murray hastened to load up their rented camels with enough supplies to last several weeks. The decision to follow the star had been Gerald's and the choice to come along or to stay behind had been Frank's and Murray's. Preparations were delayed when Murray learned that his camel had not had a tune-up in over thirty thousand miles. Time was of the essence. The star was moving and by their calculations it was headed west. They had packed the Berlitz book of Hebrew and Latin just in case they had to cross the border into Judea. Frank was just a bit nervous about the prospect of foreign travel. It was true, he had accumulated quite a lot of vacation time and stood to lose it if he did not take it, but a nice quiet couple of weeks at home also sounded like a good idea. Gerald, on the other hand, was chomping at the bit, or rather, his camel was, to get started. Gassed up and ready, he had the hotel confirmation numbers and the credit cards stashed safely inside the pocket of his vest. He had made reservations for three, but if Frank decided not to come along he anticipated no penalties. Gerald's attention to detail included getting the gifts wrapped and stored should the star actually turn out to be a sign that a messiah had arrived. He had studied the practices of Israel's priests and the gifts he had

chosen of gold, frankincense and myrrh should meet with the approval of any religious authorities to the west. According to his studies the Israelite priests put the frankincense in golden chalices and brought that along with holy bread before the altar of their god. Gold and frankincense were sacrificial gifts and myrrh was used to anoint their messiahs. The anointing was done with perfumed oils and it was the myrrh that gave the oil a sweet smell like roses. "Good gifts," he thought to himself. "Most suitable for a messiah."

When Frank and Murray finally pulled themselves together, at the very last minute, Gerald was waiting, somewhat impatiently as his camel shifted from foot to foot balancing and maneuvering the heavy load on his back. The caravan carried food enough and supplies for three starchasers and the hired help. Gerald had packed extra of nearly everything, having travelled with Frank and Murray before. They had a tendency to forget even the most essential items: toothbrushes, toothpaste, shaving cream, even pajamas.

Traveling over long distances one runs the risk of encountering bandits, so Gerald decided to not to compound the nervousness of his harried companions by telling them about the gifts. They set out keeping the star just ahead of them, travelling by night and sleeping by day.

They arrived at the Roman border of Israel with a minimum of hassle. Murray complained at the outset, about the poor job the all-night mechanic had done tuning up his camel. Frank kept flashing back on all of the things he had forgotten to do before he left; muttering incessantly as he compiled a list of the things he had to do just as soon as he got home. Gerald made the necessary inquiries at the border in order to find out how one makes an appointment to see the King of Israel.

As they made their way to Jerusalem the word spread through the hired helps' grapevine that the three starchasers had arrived. They were classified dignitaries by virtue of their scholarly vocations and Herod, more out of curiosity than anything else, agreed to see them. Herod's was a gracious diplomatic gesture which should be accorded such visitors from over the border. He also knew that the Roman emperor kept a staff of such scholars on his payroll and an alliance with these three might be to his own advantage. They might well bring news of the impending fall of Caesar or his empire written in the stars. "Oh ho!" he schemed, "What a coup that would be!"

The starchasers were escorted to the palace quite late in the evening. It seemed an odd time for a casual visit, but Kings are not expected to keep bankers' hours. Before the introductory small talk had finished its compulsory thirty minutes, Murray decided to cut in and

get to the reason for their visit. The star had appeared to stop and he was agitating to learn why. "We came looking for the new King of Israel." Tact was not Murray's strong suit and as he blurted out the reason for their visit, Frank and Gerald choked on their simultaneous sips of wine. All three watched as Herod's eyebrows slowly rose into a forthcoming interrogative. As Gerald attempted to explain how the three of them interpreted the star's significance and its movement westward, Herod's expression sagged and wrinkled into a scowl. The more they explained, using words like messiah and anointed one, the more agitated Herod became.

Before their visit escalated into an international incident, Herod abruptly called their meeting to a close and invited them to stay the night in the palace. They accepted the lavish accommodations offered to them, not wanting to ruffle Herod's imperial feathers anymore than they already had.

The King spent the night conducting some hasty investigations of his own. He was furious. Here these foreigners drop in to ask directions to an event he doesn't even know has happened. Neither does he know the answers to the who, the what, the when, the how or the why,...yet!

"I am the King!" he said to himself. "I am God's anointed!" "I am the savior of Israel." "I am the one who

mediates between the people and God. It's my job." Feeling a little like his predecessor, King Saul must have felt when he heard about David, Herod called his chief priests together to review for him the messianic propheisies. As near as they could figure it, after thrashing through the holy writings, a few obscure lines of Micah offered the only clue, to the mysterious new messiah. "Bethlehem." they said. "That's all we can come up with, O mighty king." "He or she is somewhere around Bethlehem."

Rumors about a messiah spread like wildfire through the city and Herod felt his only recourse was to somehow convince the starchasers to work for him. If he was unable to control such events within the borders of his own kingdom, his position as king and messiah would be jeopardized. He couldn't afford to lose his influence with the Romans either. He summoned Gerald, Frank and Murray from their beds in the middle of the night under the guise of sending them on a secret mission as his special envoys. He sent them straight to Bethlehem, he hoped on a wild goose chase and instructed them to, "by all means" tell him if they found what they were looking for.

Not one of the three starchasers had slept, haunted as they were by the expresson on Herod's face when Murray had blurted out the reason for their journey.

Murray was panicky. He didn't like Jerusalem anyway. It was too crowded and besides the food didn't agree with him. Frank had begun to feel the pressure of the bills piling up on his desk at home. Frank and Murray were beginning to lose their perspective. It was as if they had forgotten their original intention to discover the whereabouts of a messiah and pay tribute to the one who held even the attention of the stars. Now their lives were in danger and the urgent desire to escape and return home would require some fancy footwork on all of their parts. They set out for Bethlehem where the star rested in the night sky. It beckoned to them as if to say: "Come." "Come to me and see what I have to show you."

When they arrived in Bethlehem, Gerald began asking around about a messiah. Frank and Murray felt self-conscious and uncomfortable trying to communicate with foreigners. The Bethlehemites talked too fast for their high-school Hebrew and their accents were too thick besides. Gerald had only a smattering of Aramaic, but it was enough to help him understand. He received a promising lead at the Bethlehem Motel "6" and headed for an obscure hut built into a hill at the end of the block. The night manager at the motel said that a couple had tried to get a room a few nights before, but with the influx of people returning home for the census there were no rooms left by the time they arrived. The woman was

pregnant and obviously in labor so he, the night manager, had taken them down to the hut and given them food, linen and blankets. The woman did just fine and delivered a healthy baby boy. When Gerald asked him about the star, the night manager said he remembered seeing it for the first time that very night about the time he heard the new baby cry.

As Gerald headed down the street, his two companions trotted after him repeating over and over again: "In a barn? Gerald?! In a barn?!" Murray pressed the point and said: "Alright now Gerald, enough is enough. We're in hot water with the king and the only thing that's happened in this town is the birth of a baby to people who don't even live here! Now, let's just go home. Gerald? Geraaaaaald!?"

Gerald spun around on his heel to confront the other two who stumbled passed him forcing them then to backtrack two steps in order to face him. "Now, that's enough!" he proclaimed. "We are going to the end of the street and we are going to see what is going on in that hut!" He turned and pointed at their star: "Look at the star. It's directly above us. This must be the place. Murray, take this myrrh, and Frank, you take the incense. I've got the gold. Now we are going to take these gifts and we are going down to that hut and we are going to do what we came here to do. We are

starchasers. We've chased that particular star to this particular place, even to that particular hovel over there. Now, if someone in that hovel is the messiah sent from God, we can do no wrong by offering these gifts as our tribute. And if there is no messiah there, these folks will have the gifts anyway. Am I making myself perfectly clear? Then and only then will I be ready to leave."

A bit mortified by their own behavior, Frank and Murray took the gifts gracefully in hand and took their places behind Gerald in a formal procession. The three starchasers walked, heads held high and gifts held forth in the direction of the hovel that awaited them at the far end of the street. As they reached the entrance, a strange calm spread over them. There was a total sense of "rightness" about this place. Whether their calm was because they knew their starchase ended here or whether it was the strange aura about the child sleeping in its mother's arms, they couldn't say. It depends on who you talk to. They laid their gifts before the young mother and sleeping child and thought they caught a glimpse of the faintest of smiles on the infant's lips. They bowed low to the somewhat startled parents of the child and left.

None of them said much on the journey home. They managed to make a wide circle around Jerusalem on their

way east having decided not to tell Herod about the child. There was something about the sweat on the king's palms that told them the secret mission to Bethlehem held more than casual significance for the king.

Gerald possessed a sense of fulfillment. It was more than a sense of accomplishment for taking the risk and discovering the answer to the star riddle. He felt, for the first time, the presence of the divine, not sailing aloft in the mystery of the distant stars, but here on earth, now in this very moment in time.

Murray loves to tell the story embellishing the truth a bit and always ending with: "We were lucky to get out of their with our lives." But lingering in his words is a sense of awe when he describes his visit to the hovel and the smile on the lips of the sleeping child.

Frank paid the bills as soon as he got home and cleared off his desk. So relieved was he at his own efficiency that he announced that he might just plan a trip eastward in the coming year. The smell of burning incense filled his office and as often as he closed his eyes he could remember the face of the child and the awesome wonder of that moment when he heard himself mutter: "Here is the Messiah, this tiny baby. O God what a wonderful surprise!"

AMEN

Midrash On the Call Of Disciples

The three magi identified the messiah, the one who has come in the name of the Lord to relate to humanity in an altogether different way. The following midrash is a modernized story about a surprising response that some humans have to the always beckoning grown-up messiah.

Christ calls humanity to join him, to be his disciples. Many of us are reluctant to follow and some feel they have been dragged kicking and screaming into communion with God and Christ rather than being coaxed as is suggested in some modern theological circles.² The first disciples, we are told, were fisherman who left their nets to join Jesus' ministry. I can't help but think that there were some folks who were aghast when they heard the news, but when we tell the story from our pulpits, no jaws drop. There is no element of surprise in the way we tell the story, so why should we expect such a response from a congregation of listeners who have heard the story before.

It is probably safe to say that few of us know much about the life of today's professional fisherman, nevermind the life of Peter, James and John. What is more, we do not spend much time worrying about it. But if we are to be disciples of The Christ we must grasp the

²John B. Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin, Process Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 64.

significance of what "following" meant, at least to some of Christ's disciples.

This second midrash retells the story of The call of the fishermen. It is set in Maine in a spot very familiar to me. The story is told through the eyes of a child who remembers her day at sea with a lobster fisherman named Herbie. Its a day long adventure on the Atlantic Ocean where the reader/hearer meets three lobsterfishermen. The details of color sound and smell are all important to the story to distract the reader/hearer while the story builds to its sudden climax.

The midrash is based on Mark's chapter 1:16-20. Perhaps Mark knew that the readers of his Gospel would be immediately excited by the story of the fishermen needing no detailed explanations as to what their decision might involve. But our memory is thousands of years removed from the event and the shock value of the story has worn off.

It is, therefore, time to say again one of the interesting ways by which God perpetuates the covenant with humans is to select spokespersons from the general population. As the generations of humans grow in number, God has an ever widening variety of folks to choose from. We might assume that God will always choose these spokespersons from the brightest and the best intellectually -- people who are imbued from birth with

warm personalities, grace, gregariousness, style and a touch of class. However, God is not obliged to act predictably or in a manner that makes and shred of human common sense. That said, the following is a story about the suddenness and unpredictability of God.

Mark 1: 16-20

And passing along by the Sea Of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." and immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him.

"Leon, Herbie And George"

Turbot's Creek lies just inside Von's Reef between Kennebunkport and Cape Porpoise, Maine. The Creek is named for the fish called Turbot which is supposed to be good to eat. "The Turbot" was also the name of my grandfather's sailboat. I know the sailboat lived in the Creek, but the fish moved away a long time ago.

The Creek is lined with lobster shacks mounted high on wooden pilings to accomodate the high tides of the winter months and the occasional hurricanes. These shacks are given names like "The Blue Boy" and "The Red Herron." They are built for storage, although some have been converted into "cute" little cottages for summer visitors. Inside the real shacks one might find mountains of lobster traps to be repaired, fish-netting for the inside of the trap, cork floaters, and outboard engine or two, lobster bouys hanging on every available nail, a work bench strewn with hammers, nails, screwdrivers and screws, hooks and half full cans of paint and turpentine. One is bound to see a red gas can or two and Mae-Wests (lifejackets which need no further description) in at least three sizes.

Leon and George had lobster shacks on Turbot's Creek. They kept their small fishing boats moored in the very middle of the right-of-way a few feet from shore. The tides in the Creek were high and low every twelve hours making it absolutely essential to follow the tide

tables in order to know when there would be enough water in the Creek to row out of it.

Herbie kept his larger boat moored over in Cape Porpoise Harbor. Keeping it there, as many of the lobster fishermen did, meant he always had water enough to get out onto the open sea. The fishermen who moored their boats in the big harbor were not at the mercy of the tides.

Leon and George kept their business and their boats small and stayed in Turbot's Creek. Leon's white Nova-Scotia Pea Pod looked like just that, a 14 foot white open pea pod because it was pointed at both ends.³ Leon sent to Nova Scotia to have his boats built and would ask a troller sailing south to drop it off along their way. Leon mounted a small three horse-power outboard motor on the starboard side at the stern for gusty days that made it next to impossible to "tack" out of the narrow creek under sail. The outboard was his concession to mechanized lobster fishing. If there was a steady breeze he'd hoist the small mainsail which turned the pea pod into a "cat-ketch" and sail in silence out to sea to investigate his traps. It saved on gas. Leon, to put it politely, was a

³I never new the type of boat that Leon rowed out to sea, so I could only describe it according to my memory. I telephoned my Uncle Bud for some other details like the real name of Herbie's boat and he filled me in on the Nova Scotia Pea Pod.

frugal man. Lobster fishing on such a small scale was not the most lucrative of professions.

I heard a story about his saving habits once. He apparently decided to buy a car, and after he had picked out the model he wanted, the salesman asked him how he planned to finance the car. Leon answered simply: "I wasn't plannin' to finance it (pronounced: tooooo fynance it). I got the cash to pay frit right heeah." Leon pulled out the bills and placed them one by one in the salesman's hands, paid for his new car and then drove home.

Both Leon and George were quiet men, I suppose the what we would call the sterotypical rugged man of the sea. They didn't talk much at all, though George always had a smile and a wave for me. He was a short dumpy fellow who rowed his green square sterned pram out beyond the reef every morning to pick up his traps. As I remember, his clothes were green as well and he wore a long black rubber apron, which hung down over his lobsterman's boots.

All lobster traps, when dropped to the sea floor, were marked with a wooden bouy that was painted with the lobster fisherman's registered colors. The bouys floated on the water marking the spot where the trap had been dropped. Most of the bouys had long stick handles which made them easier to grab onto from the bigger boats, like

Herbie's. Leon's bouys were green and gray like his "fish-house". George's buoys were dark green and white. His green was a different shade, a darker sea green from Leon's more muted colors. The white and green alternated in stripes around the stick handle. The colors were not just slapped on any old way. A lobsterman's bouy marked his private property and his colors were not to be mistaken for anyone else's. The bouys were bunched up in the same spots and it took some skill to maneuver a speed boat through the fields of floating obstacles that dotted the ocean.

Herbie invested in a big diesel powered lobster boat, like the ones moored in the Cape. They were called "one-lungers" because of the cough-like exhaust noise they made when they started up. By the fifties they were fairly powerful and had cabins up front with bunks and kitchenettes. Generally, all one might find in the cabin was a couple of coffee cups, a two cup coffee pot, blankets, a fire extinguisher and bunks strewn with Mae-Wests and float cushions.

My first trip lobster fishing with Herbie began one morning at dawn. As the sun rose it danced on the water like millions of shimmering diamonds stirring the sea into wakefulness. We piled into the big blue Oldsmobile that my mother called Sapphire and drove over

to Cape Porpoise for our first lobsterfishing adventure. We all knew Herbie really well. He was a good friend of my uncle's and my cousins. His wife Clara-Mae had been our babysitter both before and after she and Herbie got married.

When we got to the pier, we rowed out to the "West Wind" which was the name of Herbie's boat. Most of the boats were named after the fishermen's wives or mothers and had names like the "Sallie II" or the "Lucy D", but Herbie was a bachelor when he bought the "West Wind" and the single fisherman puts his fate in the hands of the gods who come forth out of the west wind not the hands of a mortal woman.

My nose was only beginning to get used to the incredible stench of the herring bait which hung in the air over the pier. It was a haven for the lazy seagulls that loitered on the pilings hoping for a tasty morsel of discarded fish. The pier fishers were already in place with their single lines dropped straight into the water a few inches from the pier. The tourists were the only ones who used fishing poles. Some were there for sport, and others just for something to do on a lazy summer day. How they could stand the smell I don't know. The terrible odor seemed to fade, however, as we were finally absorbed into it; we became part of it. When the odor soaks into your system, you don't smell it anymore as being a smell

different from your own. I and the dead herring became one.

We motored out to Herbie's traps, the spray of the salt water in our faces, and our Mae-wests firmly in place. We had to watch our step as we slithered on the wet scaly deck in nothing but our sneakers. Herbie wore his big black rubber knee-high fishing boots with the red rims around the sole. They had thick tread like car tires. Herbie was tall and lean, with one tooth missing on the side of his smile. When he smiled his eyes sparkled and a dozen crows feet spread across his weather beaten temple.

We arrived at one of Herbie's red and green bouys, bobbing back and forth as if waiting anxiously to be snatched up out of the cold ocean. He leaned over the gunnel of the boat, grabbed the handle of the bouy and hauled it on board. Then he hooked the line attached to the trap to a pulley and lifted the trap from the deep dark depths. He set the dripping wooden trap on the gunnel and pulled mounds of seaweed off the top of it. It was the good kind of seaweed; the stuff that pops when you squeeze it, between your fingers. Herbie opened the trap door on top of the trap; he reached in and took out the struggling lobster, almost like it was a grab-bag prize. Then he weighed it. If it wasn't regulation size he was obliged by law to throw it back. If the poundage was too small the market's wouldn't buy it anyway. Then Herbie either re-baited the trap and threw it overboard again or

kept it on board to move it to a choicer location. If the lobster weighed enough it joined others in a barrel filled with sea water. This way the lobsters were kept alive for market.

Our day's work was over about noon and we returned the "West-Wind" to her mooring. We left Herbie to mend the broken traps, touch up the paint on faded bouys, wash down the deck and throw the old bait over the side where the seagulls swooped down squawking, screeching and scolding one another as they fought over the long awaited luncheon buffet.

Back in Turbot's Creek, Leon and George moored their seemingly tiny boats and rowed to their shacks leaving a lonely seagull perched on the bow like a night-watchman on the bow waiting for the next day's routine to begin once again.

But Leon, Herbie and George did not return the next morning. They abandoned the seagulls who watched over their boats and they abandoned their traps and their bouys and the stench of dead herring bait. In a single moment they had heard the voice of a stranger calling them away from the sea: "Come you fishermen and follow me."

Herbie, tall and lean with sparkling eyes, a partially toothless grin and black rubber boots covered with herring scales will not be boarding the "West Wind" today or tomorrow. He has gone.

George, short and dumpy, with his dark green work shirt and brown baggy pants held up by suspenders to let the waist of his pants rest comfortably under his ponch, won't be back today to track through the thick gray Creek mud walking his pram in from the sea at low tide.

Leon's extra-long brimmed lobster fisherman's cap hangs on the nail in the fish-house next to the dingy sail bag which is usually slung over his shoulder just in case there is a breeze. Standing by the door as if waiting for a pair of fisherman's feet are a pair of big black rubber boots covered with Turbot's Creek mud.

The fishermen aren't coming back today to rescue the lobsters from their traps. They are doing something new. They have gone fishing for humans trapped in a sea of despair and confusion. Maybe they can rescue them and lift them into the sunlight of a new day. Who's to say?

AMEN

Midrash On Conversion

The final step on the way to making a confession of faith is the conversion. The term refers to a change, that is a change in belief, attitude, action or lifestyle. In matters of the faith it is hard to say if conversion is an active process which involves a decision or if it is a passive process which suddenly happens to us and is brought about by influences outside ourselves. There are many people who remember their particular "conversion experience" as a stunningly powerful one hard to describe as a conscious decision making process.

There are wondrous and varied conversion stories in the scriptures which help each of us to know that whether we define our own conversion as active or passive it was and remains legitimate. All types of people from all walks of life have made the great confession as a result of their converted, changed way of thinking and believing. Their conversion, however does not mean they look different or talk different or have any more class than they had prior to the experience. The conversion is not a magic formula which transfigures humanity; it simply frees us to live out our lives connected to God rather than alienated from God.

I have wondered for a number of years now what the "Church's" fixation is with women as harlots and

whores. Women who are WOMEN (as opposed to pre-pubescent girl-children) are depicted as temptresses and adulteresses who are fast and loose with their morals. If a woman exudes sensuality it is her fault. Sensuality is in the eye of the beholder. Yet the church has forced women to take the blame for what men desire about them.

The woman with the Alabaster flask in Luke's chapter seven has been branded by society "a sinner". She is a sensuous woman, a touching, carressing, tearful woman who proclaims her conversion by her actions much to the dismay and discomfort of those who watch her anointing the Christ. She is the "Threshold Woman" who experiences a change in her own self-image because of her experience of the Christ.

The following midrash is a poem. It is a most adventurous experiment in preaching. I preached it for my congregation on a rainy day in January when the roof began to leak. I knew the imagery was bound to make them a bit uncomfortable. About half way through several parishoners, who had begun to get squirmy, rose and went about placing plastic buckets under the drips that were falling from our 50-75 foot ceiling (amplifying even more the sound of the drips). As soon the congregation took part in the distraction, I stopped preaching and turned with my back to the congregation. I waited for what seemed an eternity, and when it was obvious that I had

their undivided attention, I began all over again at the beginning.

In this poetic midrash I lift up a famous unnamed woman who has been portrayed as something more akin to a traditional "geisha" rather than a woman whose soul has just been turned inside out. She is a woman who dares to announce her conversion to a room full of men, by performing a silent symbolic ritual which confounds all but the guest of honor at a very private dinner party.

The questions that I asked of this text began with: "Who is she? What is it about her hair that so shakes my sensibilities? ⁴ What do the men see? What are they thinking? What has happened to this woman? What difference does it make? How does she move?"

What follows is a conversion midrash written in free verse and which is designed to make the reader/hearer squirm a little as I imagine the witnesses to this very unique and special event also did.

⁴ Swidler, 187.

Luke 7: 36-50

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house, and sat at table. And behold a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that Jesus was sitting at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind Jesus at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who or what sort of woman this is who is touching him for she is a sinner." And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And Simon answered, "What is it, Teacher?" "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, the creditor forgave them both. Now which of them will love the creditor more?" Simon answered, "The one I suppose, to whom the creditor forgave more?" And Jesus said to Simon, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? When I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but whoever is forgiven little, loves little." And Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" And Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

RSV Inclusive Language Lectionary

"Threshold Woman"

Outside, a woman
not a good woman, they say;
an outside woman,
a, hair-loosed-in-public-woman,
an, in-the-town, sinner woman,
heard that Forgiveness sat a table
with Simon the Pharisee.
A searching, detests-her-life,
listening woman, made her way
to the house where Redemption reclined
feasting on food and conversation.
More than curiosity, desire compelled this
aching, yearning-to-be-free woman,
to cross the threshold into a house forbidden.
Desire compelled her to enter
into the presence of despising eyes;
eyes that hunger in secret;
eyes belonging to those who use
in private what they shun in public.
What brewing, seething, frothing storm;
what turmoil erupting within,
hurled this shunned-one over the threshold
where Freedom lay waiting?

This wrestling-with-her-demons-woman,
wounded and scarred by their rage,
stormed her own fortress, built with unworthiness bricks
and devil's mortar.

She crashed through the embattlements
amid the thunderous storms of doubt and hesitation
And conquered the dragon of fear
with a quiet rain of tears.

Soft, delicate, drops of wonder,
salt of the earth full,
salt of the soul full,
fell gently and lovingly on the dusty feet
of Forgiveness.

Touching, caressing, tears;
wet, loose-in-public-hair,
sensual, long, soft, silky,
slowly wiping in a concentrated ritual.
Overly skilled lips, kissed, feet and toes.

Strong attentive hands anointed, poured, rubbed
weary, calloused and dry skin with a
thick, sweet-smell-of-roses oil,
alabaster smooth, to soothe, to cleanse
the well of Forgiveness.

A thirsty soul she prepares to taste Forgiveness;
to smell it, to touch it, to embrace it passionately,
For Forgiveness breeds passion; passion for life
which heralds death.

Its perfume nestles close,
a cloudlike, yet heavy fragrance
that hangs in the air dancing invisibly
whispering inaudibly balancing on the senses.
And Redemption intrudes an, uninvited guest, in
the Judgement house of the Pharisee.
Redemption invades, born in the hands
of the soon to be forgiven.
Without warning, desire steps forward,
a longing, throbbing, burning need
to quench the fires of self-deprecation and
self-destruction.
And in the house of Righteousness
Fear looks on, watching as the needy
one caresses the feet of Forgiveness.
Fear grimaces, rigid, squirming, uncomfortable,
embarrassed, disgusted, imprisoned, fettered to
a Judgement seat.
Forgiveness, alone, received the tender touch
that longs for freedom and salvation.
Forgiveness, alone, spoke above the murmurs
and the mutterings of the afraid-to-touch-people.
In that moment, the eyes-of-faith-woman adorned
her face with the glow of forever remembrance and love.
In that moment came the death of doubt.
A thirsty-for-Freedom-woman
drank at the well of Forgiveness

quenching her desert spirit with
the water of life.

A new creature in her own eyes
she bore the sameness
of that, outside-woman,
that hair-loosed-in-public woman
who discovered Faith
in her wandering-in-the-wilderness-soul
the moment she touched Forgiveness and
stayed in the company of the fearful unafraid.

Who will be this second-chance woman be tomorrow?

A, rather-than-surviving, woman,
a, more-each-day-thriving, woman,
she believes anew each morning hanging
onto the voice, the words, and
the face of Forgiveness.

This, faith-possessed woman holds, now, the power
to choose consciously not unwittingly
the course of her destiny.

Wishes once maimed by resignation are healed
by determination; allowed, now
to flourish into dreams and even plans.

This unafraid woman holds in her heart
the magic to risk success.

Her faith is her magic, sipped from the well of
Forgiveness.

For Redemption deemed her worthy and
willingly she agreed.

Who regards this, once, outside-woman
as like unto yourself?

Then you shall reach deep into the
dark places of your fortress soul,
for you are thirsting to drink as she did
from the living Forgiveness well.

Who regards, this once, outside-woman
as like unto the church?

Reach deep now, into the
dark places of her fortress soul.

Is she thirsty?

If "yes" is the whispered gasping response from within,
know this, that Redemption reclines in the midst of
our feasting and Forgiveness passes your lips.

Drink in your faith in the moments of remembrance.

Taste if you will the first fruits of a new thriving
spirit born in the instant
that fear and doubt die.

And what once were wishes maimed
and forgotten, for so many years
ignored, will flourish into dreams
and even plans nourished by faith out-poured.
For Forgiveness has called you forth
from the threshold

with your loose-in-public-hair
and receives you with your alabaster flask of oil
the symbol of your desire and longing.
You pass from the outside,
first to the inside to touch those
dusty feet with your tears
and from that moment onward
from the inside out you are not the same.
You pass from the inside now to the outside
wearing Forgiveness' name.
AMEN

CHAPTER 7

Midrash On Parable

Some parables inspire preachers to groan everytime they appear in the lectionary. One such parable is the parable of the vineyard tenants in Matt. 21:33-40. According to Matthew's conclusions, the judgement that shall rain down upon the tenants of the vineyard is harsh for they acted cruelly and ungratefully. For my part, I must ask what drives human beings to such acts of violence? If the story is an allegory of christ's crucifixion, then perhaps the laothsome violence bred in the midst of a mob could be examined in a midrash on this parable. I think the parable offers a much wider scope of interpretation than simply saying that the vineyard owner represents God; the servants, the prophets; and the son, Jesus Christ.

The parable is, by definition, an ordinary story which makes us squirm. In this case we are most uneasy, because there is no one in the story that we want to indentify with. Indentifying with the landowner is a bit presumptuous. Identifying with the servants or the son, in any case , is deadly, leaving only the tenants and we cannot imagine our own behavior mirrored in theirs. It is

for this reason that the tenants must be given identities, not names necessarily, but dreams and ambitions and needs and foibles. The tenants must go through a transformation since it is unlikely that the landowner would let his vineyard out to hostile folks. The winemaker and his family (the tenants) did not begin life as evil people. If that were true we would have no place to start. The vineyard must come alive under the care of the landowner and the tenants. It must be alive and productive as Matthew describes it, becoming a functioning, thriving, profitable enterprise in the absence of the landowner. Only then are we ready to ask the questions that give birth to the midrash.

"What happened? What brought about the change in the tenants? How long was the landowner absent? When was the last time the tenants heard from him? What did they do with the profits from their labors? Why did they refuse to give the landlord his due? Why kill?"

Perhaps more than any others, this parable and the one that follows from Luke's Gospel need to be preached in this day of Masters degrees in Business Administration and mega multi-national corporations. For we are a society caught up in acquisitions on a large and a small scale. We are about the business of acquiring more and more

power, wealth and just plain stuff, because more is better. What we have not yet learned is that more is simply more and has a tendency to clutter up our lives. This is the lesson that the vineyard tenants learned; a lesson that might have destroyed them. ¹

The parable of the dishonest steward, which follows this parable is another story that we just loathe because the line drawn between the good-guys and the bad-guys has gotten tangled in a knot.

The following midrashim are entitled, "The Vineyard" and "Stewart The Unwise" respectively. The symbols in both stories are mixed, utilizing both ancient and modern. The sudden appearance of the modern images, almost absurdly comical, grabs hold of the reader/hearer and without warning stands him/her in front of a full length mirror for a good long look.

¹ I read about vineyards, winepresses and towers in The Interpreter's Dictionary Of The Bible. This midrash however is a psychological study of humanity at its best and worst. In my lifetime I have watched, first hand, the struggles of the small business man: my father. He worked 12 hours a day 6 days a week and bought his "vineyard" when the "landowner" was about to liquidate it. In today's world where the Masters In Business Administration is the membership card of "yuppiedom" and the watchword of Big Business, its quite logical to write a midrash on how our business drives us to distraction.

Matthew 21:33-40

"Hear another parable. There was a householder who planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a wine press in it and built a tower, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country. When the season of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants, to get the fruit; and the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first; and they did the same to them. Afterward he sent his son to them saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come let us kill him and have his inheritance.' And they took him and cast him out of the vineyard, and killed him. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

RSV

"The Vineyard"

Once upon a time, a winemaker and his family wandered in search of a vineyard to care for. They had once owned their own but lost it in a terrible drought. They were forced to sell the acreage to pay off their debts. Since vines were their specialty and winemaking was their stock in trade they had but one choice, and that was to find a vineyard to work as tenant farmers.

One day, in the midst of their wanderings, they stopped for a rest and some water on a hill overlooking a lonely valley. It so happened that smack-dab in the middle of this lonely valley stood a good sized, obviously healthy, vineyard. They decided to investigate.

Descending the road into the valley the winemaker began to practice his "I'm for hire" speech, updating his resume as he went along in case the vineyard owner was inclined to interview him. Actually, an interview would include the whole family, since they came as one complete winemaking enterprise. The winemaker's wife, Lois, was highly skilled in fermentation techniques and her nose and her palate were invaluable in determining the worth of finished wines. Their sons were strong and knew all of the ins and outs of winepresses. Their daughters' sharp

eyes could spot diseased vines and their nimble fingers could not only pick grapes faster than most anyone, but they had learned the most up to date methods of grafting one type of vine to another.

As they approached the gates of the vineyard they peered over the hedge to view a state of the art vineyard truly worthy of praise. The grapes were flourishing. The hedge was solidly planted to prevent the destruction of the vines by uninvited animals. The winemaker's eyes widened when they caught sight of the winepress in the middle of the courtyard. It was constructed of the best cedar. Their collective gaze moved to the storage tower and the winemaker felt his heart beat faster with anticipation. "Oh to have such place!" he thought to himself. "So modern. So complete."

The winemaker, his wife Lois, their four sons and their six daughters stood along the hedge that rose as high as their necks. They watched as the landowner examined his vines. The place was quiet, no hustling or bustling of workers, just the whisper of a breeze blowing through the valley. The landowner looked up from his work to see twelve bobbing head staring at him over the hedge. They looked tired, bedraggled and a bit dazed so he invited them in for a drink and a chance to take a load off their feet. His gracious offer was accepted

without hesitation and as they trooped through the gate the landowner could see from their purple stained feet that his guests were vineyard officianados. His previous tenants had proved to be unsatisfactory workers and had to be asked to move on. As a generous gesture and a test of their skills the landowner offered the winemaker and his family a days work in the vineyard, along with a days' pay and overnight lodging as long as Lois was willing to prepare the meals.

The family went straight to work. The daughters headed for the vineyard. Two went about examining the older most durable vines, two others tended to the younger vines and the third team scutinized the progress of the grafted plants. The two youngest sons went to the tower where they immediately began to check the seals for leakage, plugging up any trouble spots. The two eldest sons manned the winepress investigating its workings and its state of the art options. The winemaker took note of the different varieties of grapes in the vineyard and began to dream about the future of such a magnificent piece of property. He truly admired the vineyard owner for his ingenuity and creativity and wondered if he had done any marketing research in the expanding grape market. The possibilities of entering the raisin and jelly markets were ever increasing, with name-brand franchises

available to the enterprising businessman. The winemaker and the owner chatted on about the treatments they had each found useful in protecting the vines and the fruit from pests.

The vineyard owner was eventually so impressed with the family's exuberance and hard work that in the whim of the moment he invited them to stay on as his tenants until they were back on their financial feet.

The vineyard owner and the winemaker and his family all got on well. They enjoyed working the vineyard together and shared in planning for the future of the vineyard. One day the owner was called away on important business. He had no qualms about leaving his vines and his grapes in the hands of his newest tenants. They had treated him and the vineyard with great care and respect from the outset. The landowner, as a matter of fact, had sensed a very special relationship evolving between him and his tenants. It was as though the winemaker and his wife and their flock of children had filled a sort of void in the vineyard owner's life. He had every confidence in these tenants to keep the vineyard productive and fruitful in his absence.

The winemaker and his family were delighted to run the place and pledged to keep a good accounting of the profits. As they said their farewells once again, the winemaker promised to make the vineyard owner proud of his vines and the fruit they were destined to bear.

Months passed with little word from the vineyard owner regarding his return. The months passed into years with only an occasional bit of news making its way to the lonely valley through the kindness of a passerby. The vineyard owner had gotten married and established himself in another country as one of their finest grape growers.

Now with a new vineyard to tend to and a family of his own the winemaker thought it unlikely that the landowner would soon return. In his absence, however, the winemaker and his family had worked diligently expanding the vineyard and the markets to which they sold the grapes. They now dealt with the newly established jelly markets which were proving to be quite profitable. the winemaker reinvested the vineyard profits into newer more technologically advanced equipment rennovating the winepress for greater productivity and building additional towers for greater storage capacity. He accepted payment in advance from the international markets, as well, with plans to export their finest wines.

News of droughts in other countries travelled slowly. When such news reached the winemaker, he and his family simply thanked God that the valley vineyard had been spared the torment of the angry droughts and torrential rains that often followed. As a matter of fact, the entire family had only fleeting thoughts about the unfortunate grape growers over the border, they quickly set their minds instead on product expansion in order to meet the increased demand from the now depleted foreign markets.

The pace in the vineyard was almost frenzied. There were more workers to tend three presses that ran night and day. As the winemaker's family expanded with the marriages of his sons and daughters he invested his expertise in training spouses in the arts of planting, growing and grafting as well as teaching them the ins and out of winepress repair. Lois trained them to use her special fermentation techniques, and wine tasting. She taught them all how to determine the ripeness and readiness of the jelly grapes as well.

The contracts poured in from local buyers and representatives from the international marketplace. The vineyard had grown into a full scale enterprise known to be the most lucrative in the country. The winemaker and

his family lived comfortably, but were by no means extravagant in their tastes. Oddly enough everyone assumed that the winemaker owned the property he so diligently worked. They had expanded the acreage and invested money in the new vineyards of young growers who were just getting started in the business.

The winemaker thought about the vineyard owner from time to time, and on each occasion he drew new conclusions about where he might be. "He realizes he has left the vineyard in capable hands, perhaps he has no need to return. Perhaps he has decided to give his vineyard to me, since he has established another life elsewhere. Maybe he died and has left the vineyard to me." As time passed, the occasions of such thoughtful reflection grew fewer in number until not even the winemaker thought about vineyard owner except one night a year.

At each celebration of the new year the winemaker and his wife Lois and his sons and daughters gathered around the winepress and at the stroke of midnight they drank a very private toast to their benefactor. As they drank to his health they also prayed that he would never return.

In the seventh year of their good fortune, as the

season of the fruit drew near, the winemaker looked up from his work to see three bobbing heads staring at him over the hedge. "Excuse me." said one bobbing head. "May I help you?" replied the winemaker. "May we come in?" asked the second bobbing head. "We bring you greetings from an old friend." said the third.

The winemaker's mind was screaming at him: "Don't let them in, you fool! You know who they are." He walked slowly and deliberately to the gate in an attempt to collect himself and quiet his thoughts. The voice within him grew louder, now out of control, with panic: "They're going to take it all away. You know that. If you let them in, its the end of everything you've built here. Don't you know that HE sent them."

The winemaker opened the gate and the three men bowed their heads courteously. The winemaker and his guests strolled toward the center courtyard. The visitors commented admiringly on the enormity of the vineyard as they went. Each one introduced himself in turn and the third continued with: "We bring you good tidings from the owner of the vineyard. He has sent us to collect a portion of the profits due him as well as some cuttings from the best vines. His new vineyard has not faired well during the seasons of drought and he must begin all over again."

The winemaker's head felt as though it just might explode: "There is no money to give these men," he thought as he rubbed his sweaty palms together. His cash flow was practically nil what with the investments he had made. He had a good deal of money tied up in loans made to the smaller grape growers. How could he explain?

Lois brought their guests some wine to drink as they watched the sunset over the valley. She asked the three men to stay to dinner and spend the night. They accepted gladly, and the winemaker excused himself briefly following Lois back into the house. The winemaker could barely catch his breath as he blurted out, "They've come!" Lois heard the panic in his voice and turned with a curious glance. Her husband's expression of total alarm frightened her. She walked toward him asserting a kind of innocent composure, "Who has come, dear?"

Frustrated by her calm veneer the winemaker gasped forth his answer in a harsh whisper: "The representatives of the landowner. They have come to collect his profits." His face was flushed and he was unable, now, to catch his breath. Lois took him by the shoulders and lead him to the kitchen where they sat in silence. Lois broke their silent vigil: "What do you want me to do?" she asked. "What can we do?" said the winemaker. "We can give them some cuttings from the vines, but the crop is promised to

our buyers. If we give the crop to these men we will be ruined. The profits are tied up in investments and loans. We have nothing to give them. If they return to the landowner and report what they have seen and tell him that we cannot pay, he will never believe it." And Lois said: "What if they don't go back?" "What!?" was the only response from her dumbstruck husband. Lois continued: "Suppose they don't report back to the landowner?", she repeated. "You mean invite them to stay on here?" "Yes!" replied Lois as if her suggestion was only common sense. "That will never work," said the winemaker. In the first place they know that we don't own the vineyard. It would be only a matter of time before everyone else knew the truth as well. No! They must not stay here and they must go back."

Lois and the winemaker bantered back and forth suggesting one workable solution after another as they prepared dinner for their guests. Finally the winemaker said: "Lois, that's enough. You know what we have to do."

The rest of the meal preparation went on in silence. They called their guests in, fed them well filled them with too much wine and arranged to talk business in the morning. As their guests slept off their wine, Lois and the winemaker called the family together. They plotted into the wee hours of the morning and slowly

a plan began to unfold.

At daybreak the landowner's representatives were to be treated to a sumptuous breakfast while the winemaker announced that each would be given a detailed tour of one segment of the vineyard. At lunch, he assured them, they would discuss business. One representative went deep into the vineyard accompanied by the vine and grafting experts; the next was taken to the newest of the fermentation towers and the third stayed close by to see the presses, at work. As he watched fascinated by the upscale technology of the presses, he was caught unaware by a blow to the back of the head. The heavy stone killed him instantly. At almost the very same moment, deep in the vineyard no one but the witnesses to the crime could hear the muffled sound of fists hitting flesh and pummeling muscle. And in the tower the echoes of a man drowning were inaudible over the sound of the presses.

The family members were tense and irritable for weeks, snapping at one another, often flying into rages over petty nonsense. The work at the vineyard moved at an even faster pace, and although quantity was up, quality was down. The winemaker developed a nervous tick in his right eye and Lois moved to another bedroom in the house. She would now sleep alone having been awakened night after

night by the terrifying screams of her husband's nightmares.

Months passed. The family's tension and irritability gradually waned. They stopped peering over the hedge to see if anyone was coming down the road. They began to embrace one another again. The winemaker's nightmares grew less frequent, though the tick remained and Lois moved her things back into their bedroom.

On a wondrous sunny day as the season of the fruit drew near, the winemaker looked up from the press to see six bobbing heads staring at him over the hedge. They greeted him cordially and asked if he could spare some water to refill their goatskins. As soon as they were inside the gate they began questioning the winemaker.

"Some months ago our master sent three representatives to collect his fruit from you, but they never returned." "Three representatives?", queried the winemaker as the tick in his eye became more pronounced. I don't recall being visited by any representatives of the landowner. We had expected the master himself to return some years ago, but he never did. If you like, I can check with my family. Maybe they came through when I was out of town on business. In the meantime would you honor us by having a cup of our finest wine?"

The six visitors agreed to wait in the courtyard while Lois fetched a pincer of a most special wine and the winemaker assembled his family. The wine was laced with myrrh and hemlock. Mercifully the visitors floated into a state of anesthesia before they succumbed to the deadly poison. The deed was done before anyone had time to panic. Their bodies were removed and buried with the others at the far end of the vineyard.

This time the family had been prepared. Their anxiety was short lived as if they had resigned themselves to the necessity of their violence. Certainly the landowner would not send anyone else, since his servants never returned with the fruit. By now he must have concluded that his representatives had probably stolen it for their own profit.

The vineyard flourished. The quantity and the quality of the grapes promised to be good as yet another harvest drew near.

The winemaker spent his time these days enjoying the courtyard, watching the workers and his family tend to the vines and the presses. He passed the time in subdued silence and Lois kept his cup filled with wine. The wine that once relaxed him at the close of a hard days labor now soothed his soul and calmed the tick that still

annoyed his right eye. At dusk his sons carried him to bed where he slept the night away in oblivion. He had an unusual shock of white hair on the left side of his head and his once muscular body now appeared puffy and ponchy and wasted from a diet of wine.

As Lois filled her husband's fourth cup of wine one morning, she looked up from her pouring to see a single bobbing head peering over the hedge. It belonged to a young man with a kind face and a dazzling smile. What a treat to have a talkative handsome young man for company. It would be a change from the silence she now endured. Lois longed to hear news of the world beyond the vineyard which may well explain why she let the stranger in.

"Come in; come in young man and quench your thirst," she said. As he approached Lois noted something familiar about his face, about his whole demeanor for that matter. She decided that he reminded her of one of her own sons or, perhaps her husband in his youth. The winemaker dozed in his chair and when prodded to do so, awakened briefly, acknowledged the stranger with a muffled greeting and let his chin drop back onto his chest. He snorted once or twice, smacked his lips and slept again.

Lois offered a cup of wine to the traveller and sat down beside him for a hospitable chat.

"Have you been travelling far?" Lois asked. "Oh, Yes Ma'am, I've come about..." Lois interrupted her young companion bombarding him with questions a naive schoolgirl might ask a soldier back from the war. "Tell me what news you have of the world. It's been such a long time since we have had any visitors." He told her stories about his travels and about all the people he had met on his journey. He caught her up on all the current events that he could think of. Her soul was parched and dry with a desert thirst. The stranger's words fell like a replenishing rain upon it.

The sun had begun to set before she realized that she had spent nearly the entire day talking with her new friend. Her husband bellowed for more wine every once in a while, but apart from his occasional stirrings, her time with the young stranger remained uninterrupted. She began to excuse herself to prepare the evening meal and extended an invitation to the young man. He accepted on the condition that he be allowed to help her.

The winemaker missed dinner which was often the case. His sons had carried him in and put him to bed a

bit earlier than usual today. Lois was left to make the introductions at the dinner table. She had managed to learn the young man's first name early on in their conversation. "I'd like you all to meet Joshua." said Lois with the kind of smile one saves for doting over children that one is particularly proud of. She turned to Joshua somewhat embarrassed and said, "Joshua, I'm sorry, I'm afraid I don't know your last name." As he pronounced the name, plates, cups, utensils and jaws fell, and Lois, who had been standing by the foot of the table, slowly lowered herself into the nearest chair. Knowing full well the answer to her next question, she glared at the young man through steely eyes and growled: "Who are you!!?"

"Madame," he said, "I thought you recognized me this morning. I'm the son of the man who owns this vineyard. Please, if I have offended you in anyway, let me apologize now."

Lois was seething, "What do you want?" she screeched.

In all the innocence of his young years Joshua announced: "Why I'm here to collect the harvested fruit for my father."

In a single instant they unleashed the years of hidden terror and were on him, kicking and tearing at him like crazed animals. They dragged his broken and bleeding body to the gates of the vineyard and threw him face down into the dirt. By morning he, like all the others, would be dead and there would be no one left save the landowner himself to reclaim the vineyard which had become their prize--their most precious treasure.

The young man's body lay in the road for a day and another night. By the next morning the body was gone, probably spirited off by wild animals during the night.

Lois sang and puttered in the kitchen and sat for hours in the courtyard, talking incessantly to an oblivious winemaker. Her songs were children's melodies and her conversation full of old memories. She recalled over and over again her visit from a delightful and handsome young man who entertained her with wonderful tales of the world. She wondered often if he would be by this way again for another visit soon. Their days passed one fading into the next, a meaningless empty routine of waiting. One day was no different from the next and promised never to

be, so on yet another wondrous sunny day as the season of the fruit drew near, no one took any notice of the old man descending the hill into the lonely valley to collect the harvested fruit of his vineyard.

AMEN

Introduction To "Stewart The Unwise"

Most humans dread being caught in a lie. There are relatively few so called sociopathic personalities in the history of the world who deceive without conscience, who lie cheat, steal and kill without any shame or guilt at all. In the case of such folks their "super-ego" seems to be shut off. It is precisely this type of character that we have long imagined the "dishonest steward" to be. We loathe him, and most of us refuse to identify with him because we see no evidence of remorse in the steward for his despicable behavior.

The beginnings of this story took shape as I discussed it with one of my sisters in the faith. She allowed as how Saturday evening at 8:00 pm was no time to be trying to work up a sermon on this particular parable. I agreed with her, but the Sunday bulletin, complete with scripture lesson and sermon title could not be changed and besides I wanted to tackle the parable.

The questions that came to mind were: "How did

this man get the job as Steward of the estate?" ² Did he submit a resume and have an interview? Where did he come from?" ³ "Why was he stealing from the debtors?" "Why jeopardize his position of the estate?" "How on earth does he figure out those discounts he starts handing out?" ⁴ "What makes him think, that handing out discounted "IOU's" will help his already untenable position?" "How can Luke suggest that humans cushion the consequences of such dishonesty by manipulating those who have been cheated?" Does the steward care for or about anyone other than himself? How did the steward feel about the owner of the estate? Was their relationship important or meaningless? Why did the steward jeopardize his middle-management position?

The character needed a name in order to get away from the phrase "dishonest steward". I needed to know as

² C. U. Wolf, "Steward, Stewardship," The Interpreter's Dictionary Of The Bible, vol. 4, 443.

³ Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, The Gospel According To Luke, vols. 28-28A of The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1094-1111.

⁴ Ibid., 1101.

many definitions of the Greek word *φρονίμως* as possible. When defined "shrewdly," the word suggests a kind of cunning. When defined "prudently," the word suggests "wimpishness" (to me). I preferred, therefore, the definition "wisely" as yet another translation of the Greek.*

The following midrash on parable tells the story of a servant/employee named Stewart and a landowner/employer named Sir Richard. The Parable in its original form states, somewhat obtusely, that we are responsible for our own actions. The midrash intends to make it very clear that we humans must learn from our mistakes and move beyond them. I believe that Stewart is a penitent, and that his seemingly odd behavior is an attempt to rectify his mistakes. He does this not to be manipulative, but rather because he loves Sir Richard and wants, more than anything else, to heal the wound he has made in their relationship.

* William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon Of The New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: Univ. Of Chicago Press, 1957), 874.

Luke 16:1-8

Jesus also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a steward accused of wasting his goods. And the rich man called the steward and said, 'What is this that I hear about you?? Turn in the account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.' And the steward thought, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the stewardship.' So summoning the master's debtors one by one, the steward said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' The answer came, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And the steward said, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty?' Then the steward said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' The answer came, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' The steward said, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' The master commended the dishonest steward for acting shrewdly; for the children of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of light.

RSV Inclusive Language Lectionary

"Stewart The Unwise"

The voice over the phone had somehow been disguised with what sounded like a crisp paper napkin. It might have been a woman's voice or even a child; it was hard to tell, but the message came through loud and clear. "Stewart is robbing you blind. All this time we thought you were bleeding your debtors dry with outrageous interest rates, but it was Stewart. He takes a percentage of everything for himself and sells it over at the market place." The droning on of a dial tone snapped Sir Richard out of a semi-dazed state, and he began to reason that maybe the call was just a prank. Stewart, after all, was born in this house. He was the first born son of Sir Richard's most trusted servant. After Stewart's parents died Sir Richard trained him and groomed him, as if he were his own son, to take his father's place as "right hand man" on the estate.

Realizing that his own reputation as one of the most powerful men in the region was a stake and that if one person was convinced of unfair-treatment many more would soon be convinced as well. Sir Richard decided to launch

his own private investigation. He was not given to bouts of irrational behavior but if the accusations were true, Stewart would have to be caught in the act. Sir Richard altered his daily routine, by arriving unexpectedly at one of the debt collection points where debtors and tenants of the estate made their regular payments to Stewart.

Stewart conducted the transactions professionally and cordially taking time out to give Sir Richard a progress report on the proceedings. The tenants and debtors cued up to the accountant's table dropping off the owed quantities of wheat, olive oil, wine, wool, and fruits. They gave no argument to the accountant or to Stewart, and Stewart himself was very fair in his dealings with them. He offered grace periods to those who could not meet their full quota that day.

Sir Richard, satisfied with his own investigative methods, concluded that the call had been a prank and returned to his regular daily routine. His estate was, he was sure, in capable hands.

Stewart had taken his position as a 'son of the household' very seriously even as a young boy. He worked

along side his father, learning every detail of the workings of the estate. He was smart, and even in his teenage years, he began to develop new ideas and plans for expanding the production base of the estate. Sir Richard encouraged him, grateful for his ingenuity and proud of his enthusiasm which Sir Richard attributed to his own attentiveness and guidance over the years. As the years passed the estate flourished. Stewart dreamed of becoming Sir Richard's heir by virtue of a kind of primogeniture by default. Sir Richard had been a widower for years and had had no children allowing Stewart's dream to grow into a full scale fantasy.

When Sir Richard later married a much younger woman, Stewart suddenly saw the writing on the wall and wasted no time establishing an alternate plan in order to feather his own nest. He resented the new wife who within a few months of her marriage vows showed evidence of her fecundity. She gave birth to a healthy bouncing baby boy!

Stewart subjected Mrs. Sir Richard to the full gamut of his resentment. Her greetings were met with

indifference and her requests for assistance were ignored. Only those requests which came directly from Sir Richard were given attention. If confronted with the fact that he had somehow not been available to assist Mrs. Sir Richard with whatever, Stewart apologized profusely denying receipt of any such requests from her. At the end of each apology he pledged to locate the source of the communication breakdown and remedy the problem at once. But, of course, he never did.

Stewart's instinct for self-preservation grew into an obsession and he devised a system whereby Sir Richard's debtors and estate tenants would be billed for an amount over and above what Sir Richard required from them. He kept two sets of records, one for Sir Richard's eyes and one to keep track of the actual payments received from which he withdrew the overpayments for himself. As long as Sir Richard received his portion, he would be none the wiser. The unsuspecting tenants would be billed for ever increasing amounts, in small increments, over a reasonable period of time and Stewart would simply garnish the excess. The plan worked well. Mrs. Sir Richard's

son, however, was approaching his seventh birthday and Stewart saw a time in the not too distant future when the young master would become a problem by virtue of his own natural inquisitiveness along with a strange and unwelcome affection for Stewart.

The billing increases grew more frequent and the amounts more and more unmanageable for the debtors. Stewart began changing the interest on the unpaid balance and granted shorter and shorter grace periods. He grew more and more impatient for the day when he would leave Sir Richard's estate for his own. The debtors were beginning to grumble and Stewart knew he was playing with fire, but there was no more time. He needed to take his step toward freedom now, or lose it forever.

The voice at the other end of the phone, was poorly disguised this time. It was most certainly a woman's voice. Sir Richard was almost certain that he knew the voice, but he could not place it. "Stewart is stealing from you and your debtors. He charges them far more than they really owe and you are letting him get away with it. He keeps two sets of records. Look at him, how he dresses, like a fine gentleman. Haven't you

ever wondered how he affords such garments? You are so blinded by your affection for him that you cannot see what is going on in your own house. You are a fool."

"A fool, am I? A fool?! How dare you?!!", he blustered at the dull hum of the dial tone. Slamming the receiver down, Sir Richard clenched his fists and growled. The growl crescendoed into a loud almost agonized holler: "Stewart!!!!?"

Sir Richard wasn't much for face to face confrontation. He trusted most people, particularly those closest to him. He did not lie, cheat, or steal and expected no less from his family, servants and friends. His body shook with rage as he tried to figure out what made him angrier, Stewart's taking advantage of their friendship or his own mistake in judgement. The misuse of his goods was nothing compared to the misuse of his trust, that was unforgivable. This man, upon whom he had bestowed the love and trust and respect that a son deserves, is accused of being a liar, a cheat and a thief. "How could he do this to me?!!" he raged. "Stewart?!!!!?" the anguished cry came again as Stewart crashed through

the door out of breath with eyes full of fear that some harm had come to Sir Richard.

"Sir, I'm here, sir. Are you alright?" Sir Richard collected himself as Stewart's words served to call him back from distant place of horror. Stewart had him by the shoulders. He shook free of Stewart's grasp, straightened his vest, and ran his hands through his hair in an attempt to order the chaos wrought by his rage. He turned, walked behind his desk leaned over it and looked fiercely into the alarmed eyes of his servant. Without even taking a breath Sir Richard spoke slowly through teeth clenched like a vice behind an angry sneer: "What is this I hear about you stealing from my tenants and my debtors for your own profit? Turn in your account books for you will no longer manage my estate!"

Stewart stood dumbstruck searching Sir Richard's face for some momentary flash of forgiveness, but he saw none. In that instant Stewart realized his heart's desire. More than freedom, more than financial independence, Stewart wanted once again the love, trust

and respect of this man who had been his father, his teacher, and his friend for more years than he could remember. The new wife and the new son had not threatened his position. He had threatened the position himself through his mistrust and jealous resentment of Sir Richard.

Stewart retreated quietly with no argument leaving Sir Richard frozen in his angry stance and staring after him. He went immediately to his office to pack. As he pulled the two sets of books out of his desk drawer he began talking to himself: "I know nothing else, but this job and this life. I don't have any training or the strength to work in construction. And I am too proud and too well known in this region to become a beggar. The people would make me a laughing stock before they would help me. There is not one of them who would welcome me into their household, unless perhaps, I do one of them a favor, or do many of them a favor. That's it!" Almost euphoric with this idea, he grabbed his books and went to all of the collection sites calling the debtors and tenants one by one at each site. He

reviewed each ones debts from his personal record, figuring the total amount he or she had been overcharged. He then discounted their bill. To the one who owed 900 gallons of olive oil he said, "Take your IOU and write it for 450 gallons." To another who owed 260 bushels of wheat, Stewart said, "write 200 bushels." Stewart spent all that day and the next reducing the IOU'S's of Sir Richard's debtors and tenants to the correct amounts owed. He wasn't sure exactly why he wasn't taking the money and run, except that he was compelled to try and make amends for the damage he had caused to Sir Richard's reputation. He had taken Sir Richard for granted, mistrusted him and had ultimately forfeited the only family he had ever really known. His gesture would not restore Sir Richards respect and affection for him, but it promised to restore a kernel of Stewart's self-respect.

On the third day Stewart was ready to leave the estate. He made his way to Sir Richard's study bringing with him the two sets of books and the accounting of the last two days IOU'S's and payments. He enclosed with these documents a personal IOU for the total amount

which he had siphoned off for himself.

Sir Richard sat sternly at his desk and listened to Stewart as he reviewed the books. When he was finished with his presentation, he stood before Sir Richard, Mrs. Sir Richard and young Richard and said very simply: "I humbly beg your forgiveness. I have treated you unfairly and disrespectfully." Mrs. Sir Richard and her son said nothing, but nodded their heads in polite acknowledgement of his gesture. He made a short, formal bow toward Sir Ricahrd and turned to go. "Stewart," said Sir Richard, "before you go, I want to say one thing." Sir Richard's voice softened as he said, "Stewart, my son, I am proud of you, for you have learned from your mistake, and today of all days, you have acted wisely."

Stewart gathered the remnant of his dignity into his shoulders, and leading with one arm, swept into a low bow toward his master. A single drop of water crept to the corner of his eye as he stood up tall, smiled, spun around on his heel and walked forth into the waiting arms of the world.

AMEN

Chapter 8

Summary And Conclusions

Throughout my work on this project colleagues have asked: "Why call it Midrash?" and another asked: "Are you sure you want to call it 'New Midrash' rather than 'New Testament Midrash'?"

I prefer to call these interpretive stories "Midrash" because it names a holy document. The Midrashim written on the Hebrew scriptures carries weight and has the authority to accompany the holy scriptures. Midrash on the New Testament must be allowed to carry the same weight and have the same authority. New Midrash however does not have to be confined to the New Testament. We can write Midrash on the Hebrew scriptures as well. New Midrash defines a set of holy writings that grows out of a modern tradition. New midrash does not negate the value of ancient midrash, it merely opens up the possibility of writing midrash anew as a form of modern biblical interpretation. The term is an authoritative term by virtue of its own history, and even if the unity of Christian thought never manages to bring about a

unified compilation of Holy Christian Midrash, those writings that carry the name midrash will survive as a reminder that such a compilation should indeed exist.

Because I believe in the legitimacy of human experience as a grand teacher I have worked to create a practical approach for writing Midrash. Anyone who can read and who has a pictorial imagination can create New Midrash. Notice I did not say read and write. Midrash grows out of an oral tradition and should remain "tellable" stories. The method I have outlined grows out of my own experience with the theater and my belief that characters in a story move and breathe and feel just as if they were characters on a stage. The world within story is as colorful as the real world. Chapter 2 strives to teach the budding writer or teller of New Midrash how to create in "living color."

The midrashim of Chapters 4 through 7 are like children to me, and I imagine that when they are critiqued I will feel the same way a mother feels when someone informs her that her baby is ugly. These interpretive stories on New Testament scriptures are written from a feminist perspective. When I say feminist perspective, I do not mean to say that I write stories exclusively about women or exclusively for women, but rather I write stories about men and women from a feminist point of view. In the

preceding midrashim the women are most often named; sometimes they remain unnamed and the same is true for the male characters. At times the story carries an intentional imbalance of the identities of the male and the female. In The Genesis story we read of Lot and Lot's wife. In the midrash entitled "The Vineyard" we read of Lois and her husband the winemaker. Lois is named because she is the final pivotal character of the story.

I have written midrash on familiar texts in some cases, to rescue them from the doldrums of 2,000 years of an overused male perspective. Besides men are often not familiar with the female experience and in all fairness to them a new perspective must be made available to them. Men do not know what it feels like to be that woman with the alabaster flask. Perhaps I don't either, but I can get much closer to it than the 'fellas'.

Since males have held the stories of the biblical women in their hands for so many years, its time women told the stories of biblical men through our 'objective' eyes. I use the term objective, referring to women's lack of experience as men.

Finally these midrashim are intentionally theological, in that God is everpresent in the stories. God may not be blatantly visible, but God is present in

the hint of forgiveness offered to Stewart by Sir Richard. God is present in the conversion of the Reader at Christ's crucifixion. God is present in Mary's dancing feet and in her Easter morning proclamation of the Christ's resurrection. God is present in the bread and the wine shared at the table in Emmaus. God is present in the opened eyes of Thomas the Optomas. And God is present in the whispering breezes of Maine air and the quiet unnoticed descent of an old man moving slowly and cautiously toward his vineyard in the valley. God with us, is not to be confined within the historical person of Jesus Christ, but blossoms forth in our responses to the words of Jesus Christ, the stories about the Christ and the stories that the Christ tells about us.

The Church needs New Midrash to move beyond its present dilemma. The institution of Christ's church was born out of change and is destined to struggle through its constant and continual transformations. The Church is in labor trying to give birth to a new era and like a middle aged mother of a dozen children she is having a bit of a tough time with this one. May God help her.

AMEN

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